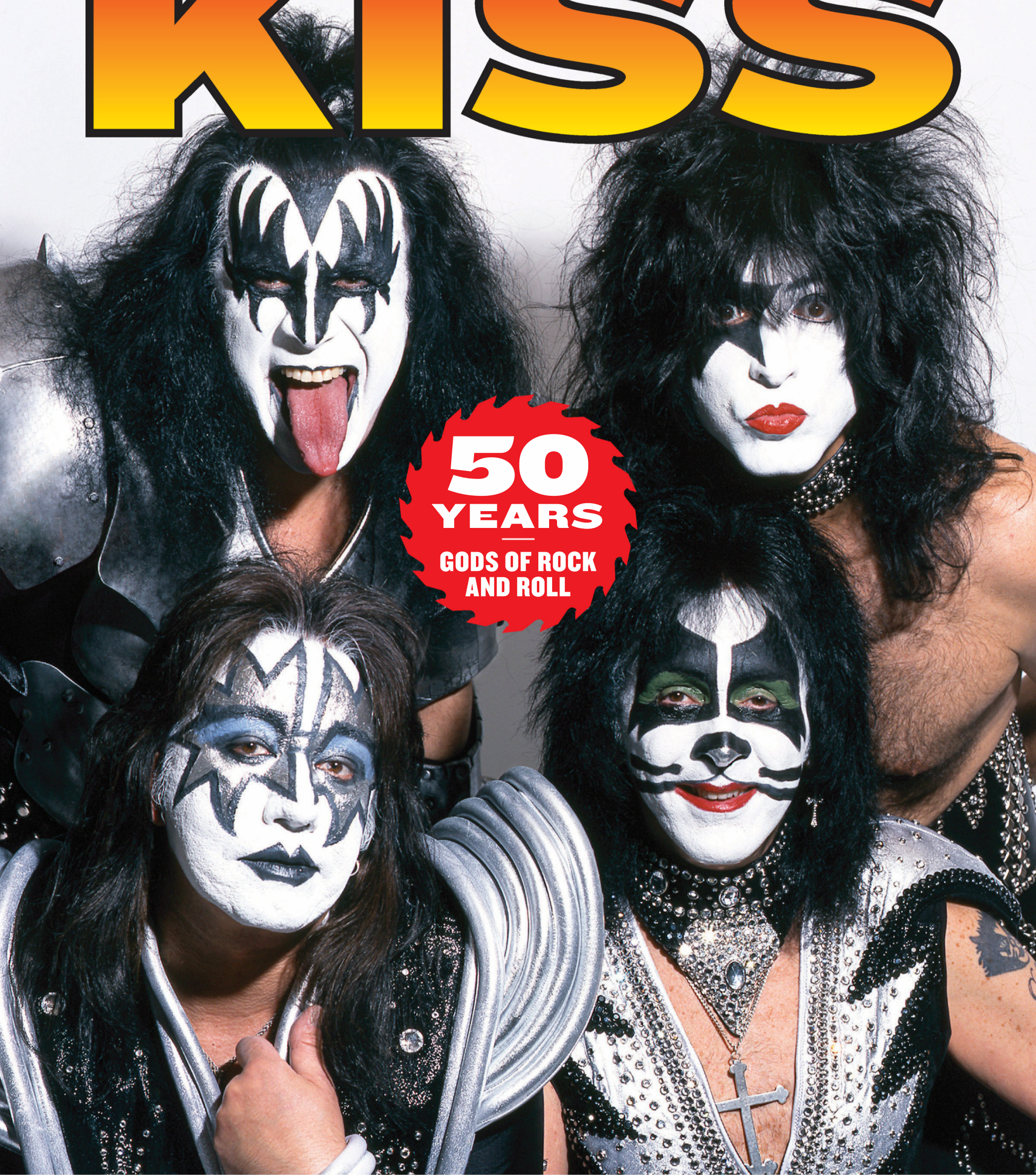


**THE HOTTEST BAND
IN THE WORLD...**

LIFE

**MUSIC, MAKEUP, AND
THE ROAD TO GLORY**

KISS



**50
YEARS**

**GODS OF ROCK
AND ROLL**



LIFE KISS



Ace, Peter, Paul, and Gene,
New York City, 1976.



KISS at the Beacon Theatre in
New York on March 21, 1975.

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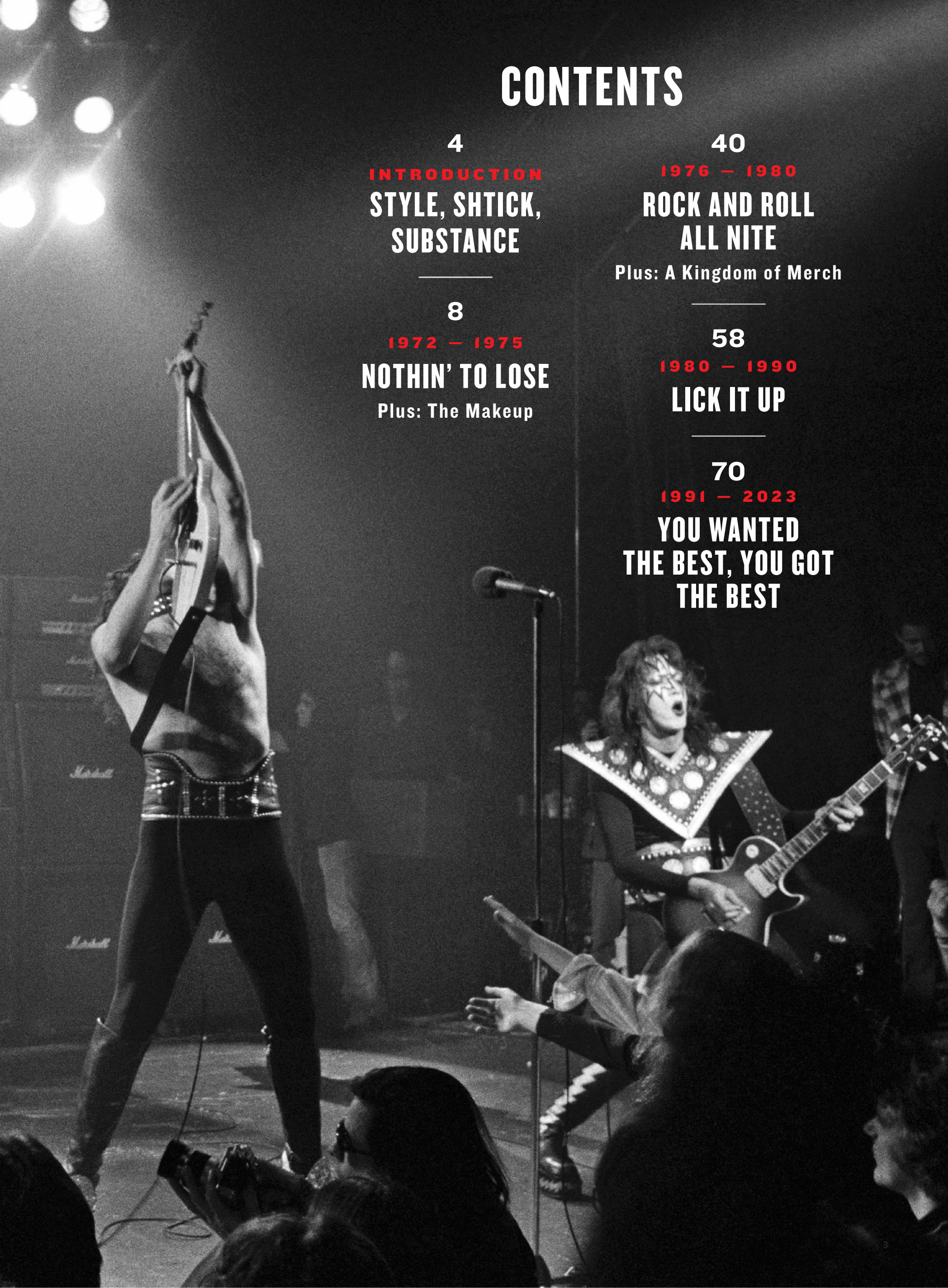
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INTRODUCTION

STYLE, SHTICK, SUBSTANCE

THE REMARKABLE SPECIES KNOWN AS KISS.



BY KOSTYA KENNEDY

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT KISS TEND TO REVOLVE around the band's extraordinary appearance and extravagant showmanship. Their "sexified Kabuki makeup. [Their] black and silver warrior bondage gear and seven-inch platform heels," as Tom Morello put it in his 2014 speech inducting KISS into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. At a live performance, Morello pointed out, you might experience, "the place blowing up with explosions, screeching with sirens . . . bare knuckled and bad ass." KISS elevates off the stage on glowing platforms. Gene spits flames. Paul flies over the crowd. Comic book superheroes come to life. Rock and roll has rarely known such giddy gall.

Nearly from the start, those industry-lifting shows were so outsized, so audacious, that you didn't even have to be there to

feel them. The live albums—*KISS Alive!*, released in 1975, and *KISS Alive II*, released two years later—could set your house afire. *Wait, was that the sound of a rocket ship going off? A race car?* I first heard *Alive II* several years after it came out. I'd just come home from school, and I was in my bedroom. I had a small plate of Chips Ahoy! cookies and a glass of milk on the bookcase. *Alive II* is a double album. I slid the first record out of its sleeve, put it on the turntable, and set down the needle. Then I stepped back and took a cookie off the plate. I was 11 years old. I had heard about and seen images of KISS—they were on lunch boxes—but I had no idea what to expect.

First the crowd noise. Then: "You wanted the best, and you got the best! The hottest band in the world, *KIISSS!*" That went straight into the Gatling-gun opening riff of "Detroit Rock City," then the drumroll, the big one-two entry chords, and

TWO MONTHS AFTER THE release of KISS's third album, *Dressed to Kill*, fans showed their love at a concert in Detroit in May 1975, the same year two high school seniors in Terre Haute, Indiana, founded the KISS Army.





KISS POWERED THE pyrotechnics in a 2009 performance.

Ace Frehley's massive guitar slide. My eyes went as wide as the record itself. I put my hand over my mouth and I closed the door to my room. *Was it even safe to be listening to something like this?* I suddenly had a secret: That this existed! That this was KISS! A brave new world with such creatures in it. I didn't know if anyone else should find out.

Alive II (like *Alive!*, as I would later discover) felt completely unbound and joyous. Urgent. There's the moment when Paul Stanley, unable to contain himself

in announcing the song, belts into the crowd: "All right! 'Love Gun!'" Or during "God of Thunder," when the drum solo closes with three momentous gongs, sounding the tocsin as it were, and Paul yells, "Peter Criss on the drums!" and the verse picks up immediately with Gene, the God of Thunder himself, singing in his guttural snarl: "*I'm the lord of the wastelands, a modern-day man of steel.*" Comic book hero indeed. In producing their live albums, KISS went into the studio to overdub and rework the tracks for

maximum effect—and that is precisely the effect they had.

For professional musicians the moment of being felled by KISS can be unambiguous. When I asked the guitarist Glenn Sherman why he loves KISS, he answered: "'Deuce': Listen to the F-chord played in the first chorus under the line '*You know your man is working hard.*' The most perfect power chord I've ever heard." Sherman is referring specifically to the version of 'Deuce' on *Alive!*, the first song on the album that



changed everything for KISS, when the notion of their global success went from improbable to inevitable.

THE HALL OF FAME INDUCTION was criminally overdue. That's almost certainly because in the glare of KISS's style, the substance of the music itself—those driving, unadorned, scrappy, gorgeous songs upon which the entire priapic colossus of the band is built—gets overlooked. “Here's a statement only

a fool would contradict: There's never been a band inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame whose output has been critically contemplated less than the music of KISS,” Chuck Klosterman wrote in *Grantland*. “I'd guess 50 percent of the voters who put KISS on their Rock Hall ballot have not listened to any five KISS records more than five times; part of what makes the band so culturally durable is the assumption that you can know everything about their aesthetic

without consuming any of it.”

KISS has produced 30 gold records, more than any American rock band ever. *Destroyer*, *Rock and Roll Over*, and *Love Gun* all went multiplatinum. KISS's songs were what led record executives to bet on the band in the first place. (Early on, their distributor, Warner Bros., liked the music but wanted KISS to ditch the makeup.) Morello in his induction speech reeled off a list of about a dozen Grammy-Award winners who drew from KISS: Metallica, Lady Gaga, Pearl Jam, Foo Fighters... on and on.

The 1994 album *Kiss My Ass*, a compilation of KISS songs covered by musicians who've openly declared a debt, includes recordings by Lenny Kravitz and Stevie Wonder, the American Symphony Orchestra, Yoshiki, Anthrax, and the Gin Blossoms. That Garth Brooks sings “Hard Luck Woman”—a KISS ballad with a cowboy swing—seemed the obvious fit for the country megastar, but it was not the song that Brooks initially had in mind. “It's gotta be ‘Detroit Rock City,’” he said when asked what he wanted to play. (Alas, the Mighty Mighty Bosstones had claimed “Detroit” first.) In 1989 Nirvana recorded a cover of KISS's “Do You Love Me?”

Even now teenagers across the country—oblivious to KISS concepts of the Demon, the Starchild, the Spaceman, or the Cat—might bop around in their air pods singing “I Was Made For Lovin' You,” the disco-era song reborn in TikTok compilations more than four decades after it broke as the lead single off KISS's *Dynasty* album.

KISS wouldn't have been the global force it became without the voluminous shtick. But the band wouldn't have been anything at all, of course, without the music. If KISS's principals were, as they say, inspired by the Beatles, you can just as easily trace the band's beginnings further back to the primordial soup of rock and roll, those fertile muddy waters that eventually enabled KISS to evolve into a species all its own. The hardest thing to do in rock and roll, in anything, is to be original. Fifty years after their debut album there has never been another band like KISS. ■



1972 — 1975

NOTHIN' TO LOSE

BY JED GOTTLIEB



**FROM DISPARATE BACKGROUNDS
BUT STEEPED IN CONFIDENCE AND
A NEW YORK GROOVE, GENE, PAUL,
PETER, AND ACE TOOK THEIR FIRST,
BIG-HEELED STEPS TO GLORY.**

BY 1974, AFTER EARLY GIGS with no audience and little money, KISS's live shows were beginning to attract attention. Shortly after the release of their first album, *KISS*, that year, the band started hiding their real faces in public. Here, the band performed in Detroit.





BETWEEN BITES OF HAMBURGER and forkfuls of peas, Gene Klein witnessed a rock-and-roll revolution.

Klein was 14 years old when Ed Sullivan introduced the Beatles to America on February 9, 1964. Instantly, the teenager saw the Fab Four's appeal: a tight, bright band that drove girls and parents wild (albeit in very different ways).

A decade later, Klein would become Gene Simmons—the Demon! Dr. Love! The fire- and blood-spitting God of Thunder! He would light up stages with 10,000 watts, stages so dazzling they would have made John, Paul, George, and Ringo seem like mere mortals.

But back in 1964, Simmons was just another teenager falling hard for the British Invasion—he and his mom were two of the 73 million people who tuned in for the Beatles' Stateside debut on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

"I wasn't sold on the Beatles," Simmons recalled in his 2001 memoir, *KISS and Make-Up*. "But then my mother walked into the room, and she remarked on how ridiculous their appearance was, and at that point I did an abrupt about-face. I said, 'No, Mom, I think they look cool.'"

"My first thoughts about pop music were born on that night, and they were simple thoughts," he wrote. "If I go and start a band, maybe the girls will scream for me."

Girls would scream for KISS. Guys would scream for KISS. Whole cities would scream for KISS. But those howls and hollers were a long way off.

GENE SIMMONS WAS BORN Chaim Witz on August 25, 1949, in Haifa, Israel. Simmons's mother, Flora Klein, was a Hungarian Jew who had been sent to a Nazi concentration camp at age 14. Most of Flora's family didn't escape the horror of the Holocaust, but she survived and made it to Israel after the war. Simmons's father, Feri Witz, had also come to Israel from Hungary. But he had trouble finding work and

wasn't around much. Even as a kid, Simmons felt his parents weren't destined to stay together. Feri eventually abandoned his wife and son. In 1958, Flora moved to New York City and eight-and-a-half-year-old Chaim Witz became Gene Klein. Simmons was a new American and he was in love: Bosco chocolate syrup, Wonder Bread, his cousin's bicycle. He raved that his adopted country "exceeded my imagination in every possible way."

Simmons's new life could be exhausting—Torah studies, struggles learning English—but he was never too tired to be awestruck. The Beatles would come later. At first Superman, Hollywood cowboys, and the Mickey Mouse Club infatuated him. Not surprisingly his favorites were "based on costumes, and the bolder they were, the better."


In his teens, music crept in. He tried a little doo-wop with some friends from his Queens neighborhood. He looked forward to every school dance. Then the Beatles on *Ed Sullivan* accelerated everything. Simmons and two pals formed the Missing Links and won their middle school talent show with covers of the Beatles' "There's a Place" and the Everly Brothers' "Cathy's Clown." He was on the road to becoming a bad boy, and the girls took notice.

"There was one girl named Stella, and she was in Mrs. Cassola's class with me," Simmons recalled in *Kiss and Make-Up*. "During class one day she turned around and said, 'Hey, Gene, will you show us that weird thing you do with your tongue?'" Little Gene stuck out his tongue and wiggled it. The trip to the principal's office was well worth the discovery that he had a million-dollar tongue.

Through high school and into college, Simmons's passions seemed to be divided among girls, rock, and superheroes. In his early 20s, the comics couldn't compete with the sex and rock and roll, but his fascination with larger-than-life masked men would soon fuel a metamorphosis.



THE FORMER CHAIM WITZ WAS still Gene Klein (above, in 1968) in high school. He had never seen an airport when he left Israel for the U.S., where he saw a TV for the first time and began his love affair with larger-than-life characters. Opposite: The Demon in 1974.

A full-page photograph of Gene Simmons performing on stage. He is wearing his signature white face paint with dark eye makeup and has his tongue sticking out. He is dressed in a dark, studded leather outfit with large circular cutouts on the sleeves. He is playing a purple electric bass guitar. A microphone is positioned near his head. The background is dark with some stage lights visible.

**GENE
SIMMONS**
BASS,
VOCALS

**PAUL
STANLEY**
GUITAR,
VOCALS



WHEN PAUL STANLEY was five years old, he socked a kid. It seemed like the kid deserved it.

Stanley, born Stanley Eisen in Manhattan in 1952, came into this world with an ear deformity called microtia. “Nothing more than a stump on the right side of my head,” Stanley wrote in his 2014 memoir, *Face the Music: A Life Exposed*. He could only hear out of his left ear and the condition led him to spend a lot of time alone, in part because he had trouble understanding people against background noise.

When Stanley did hang out with other kids, he was often bullied. When a boy spat in his face his mother told him to fight back. So he socked him. But Stanley didn’t really want to fight, even when they called him a one-eared monster. Between bullies and what he has described as a bad home life—he says that his parents didn’t get along and that his older sister, Julia, struggled with mental illness at an early age—Stanley sought a sanctuary. He found it in music.

While Simmons was happily parked in front of the TV, Stanley was lost in his records: the Everly Brothers, the Marcells, Dion & the Belmonts. When he was eight, Stanley and his family left Manhattan for a Jewish neighborhood in Queens. But he didn’t find many more connections at his new school or in the chorus of the glee club. Just like Simmons, Stanley saw his future in the Beatles broadcast. If he was going to find his clique, he needed an electric guitar.

“I had never played a guitar in my life, and I certainly had never written a song,” Stanley admitted. “And yet . . . this was my ticket out. I just knew it.”

Stanley started growing a mop top—because it looked cool and covered his ear deformity—and started a yearlong campaign of nagging aimed at his parents buying him an electric guitar. What he got for his 13th birthday was a broken-down old acoustic guitar. Stanley ignored that guitar and instead joined a band as the lead singer, barking

out British Invasion hits of the day. It took a friend’s parents’ collection of folk records to get Stanley to dust off his acoustic guitar and learn some chords.

At 14, he swapped the acoustic for his first electric guitar—a tiny Stratocaster imitation. He also traded his love of mid-’60s harmonies for an infatuation with heavy stuff such as Jimi Hendrix and the Who. Stanley went full hippie, a perfect fresh persona for his new school, Manhattan’s High School of Music & Art.

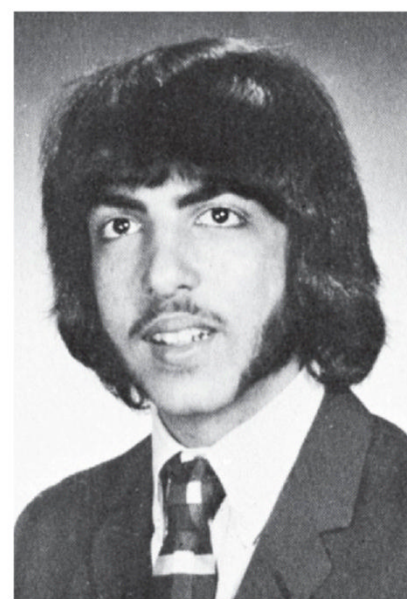
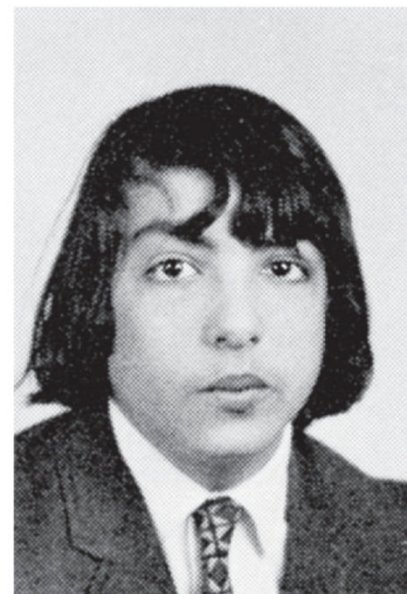
“It was time to let my freak flag fly,” Stanley said in his memoir.

If there was a school for mind-bending guitar solos and writing psychedelic jams, Stanley would have signed up. Instead fine art was his ticket to the High School of Music & Art. He liked drawing and had a talent for it, but it didn’t hold the allure of rock and roll. Stanley ended up spending more time playing in bands than at school. At one point his class rank dropped to 552 out of 587 students.

Stanley developed his rock aesthetic by seeing every concert he could. But he quickly gave up on the grungy West Coast acts: “When I saw a band with a bearded guy in it, I thought, ‘What’s Sigmund Freud doing in a rock band?’” He dug the spark and style of the second-wave British Invasion acts: the Move, Slade, Humble Pie, and the mighty Led Zeppelin. He appreciated showmanship and grandiosity.

“Robert Plant was the physical embodiment of a rock god,” Stanley said, thinking of a 1969 Zeppelin show that put his jaw on the floor. “Everybody wanted to look like Plant and sound like Plant.” Including Stanley, who started cycling through bands looking for his Jimmy Page, John Paul Jones, and John “Bonzo” Bonham. What he got was Gene Klein.

In 1970, a mutual friend, Steve Coronel, introduced Stanley and Simmons. They didn’t like each other. Stanley thought Simmons, who is about two years older than Stanley, came off as egotistical and condescending. “I thought he was full of himself, opinionated, brash, insulting,” Stanley



STANLEY BERT EISEN embraced long rocker hair (top, in 1967, and above, in 1970) partly to cover a birth defect that prevented his right ear from forming properly. Deafness in that ear, bullying, and an unhappy home life made childhood challenging for the artistic guitarist. Opposite: Stanley as Starchild in the late 1970s.

told Oprah Winfrey in 2014. “Gene’s first comment to me was, ‘Oh, I hear you write, play me something.’ So he was a bit smug.”

Simmons knew he came off as egotistical and condescending. “I can see how my manner may have been a bit off-putting,” Simmons said in his autobiography. “My enthusiasm sometimes comes off as a kind of arrogance.”

The two played some originals for each other. Stanley remembered Simmons’s songs as “sort of goofy” but also recalled that the bassist perked up at hearing one of Stanley’s tunes. The pair found they had a lot in common—they were both music-obsessed Jewish kids who chronically felt like outsiders.

**TO MAKE ENDS MEET,
THE FUTURE ROCK
IMMORTALS KEPT
TOILING AWAY AT
DAY JOBS. STANLEY
DROVE A TAXI.
SIMMONS TAUGHT
6TH GRADE.**

But what really pulled them together was their laser-like focus on making it.

“I could see a bigger picture now, and despite his idiosyncrasies—as an only child, teamwork was not Gene’s strong suit—we both were intelligent enough to know how to harness ambition,” Stanley recalled.

Simmons agreed: “Either of us alone might have made it, or might have cracked under the strain of all the disappointment and rejection. The two of us together, though, were unstoppable.”

Or rather they would be unstoppable. The pair’s first real band, Wicked Lester, stopped well short of rock glory.

Wicked Lester sounded quintessentially 1971: a dash of hard rock, a pinch

PETER GEORGE JOHN Criscuola (right, with childhood friend and future New York Dolls drummer Jerry Nolan) was born two months premature into an Italian-Irish family that lived in a tenement building with six families per house. A sickly child, the future Peter Criss was the oldest of five siblings and by high school had joined the Young Lords gang with Nolan for protection in a tough neighborhood. Opposite: Catman in 1975.



of soft rock, some groovy R&B, some far-out jams. After a few New York-area shows, the group—Stanley and Simmons plus Coronel on lead guitar, Tony Zarella on drums, and Brooke Ostrander on keyboards—captured the attention of Epic Records.

Epic wanted to sign the band provided Stanley and Simmons fire Coronel. Done. (That dismissal started a long tradition of Stanley and Simmons cutting members who slowed their momentum.) In 1971, the record company put Wicked Lester and new lead guitar player Ron Leejack in the studio—Jimi Hendrix’s famous Electric Lady in Greenwich Village.

“Paul and I never left the Electric Lady,” Simmons recollected. “During recording sessions, we would try to pinch our behinds tight so we could hold off the inevitable moment when we would have to run to the bathroom; we just wanted to look over the shoulder of the engineer and digest as much of the scene as we possibly could.”

But the sessions didn’t match the pair’s aspirations. “To be honest, Wicked Lester had no real style, no real focus.... Gene and I both hated the album,” Stanley professed. They left the band in the summer of 1972, and Epic shelved the record. (Years later, those sessions would become an object of fascination for KISS fanatics when Stanley and Simmons reimaged two of the

Wicked Lester tracks on 1975’s *Dressed to Kill*.)

To make ends meet, the future rock immortals toiled away at day jobs—Stanley drove a taxi; Simmons taught sixth grade. But they kept dreaming big—moon boots and Madison Square Garden big. To scale those heights, they needed a flame-throwing guitarist and a drummer as gonzo as Bonzo.

BORN PETER GEORGE JOHN Criscuola on December 20, 1947, in Brooklyn, Peter Criss entered the world “feet first, ass backward,” as he wrote in his 2012 memoir, *Makeup to Breakup: My Life In and Out of Kiss*. From the get-go, Criss seemed determined to do things differently. He managed to catch every illness—measles, mumps, chicken pox, whooping cough. But he toughened up, driven by his family’s advice to “fight to win,” even if you had to use a bat or brick to do it.

As a teenager, Criss joined a gang to get a little protection through high school. But Criss and his best friend, Jerry Nolan, didn’t really want fight. They both had drum kits to beat on and saw music as a way to escape the dead-end life of their peers.

“I knew, deep down inside, that my destiny was to play the drums,” Criss recalled in *Makeup to Breakup*. “Even when I was five, I’d turn over my

**PETER
CRISS**
DRUMS,
VOCALS



A full-page photograph of Ace Frehley in his iconic silver, spiky costume. He is holding a black electric guitar, and a bright light flare emanates from the bridge area. The background is dark with wisps of smoke or light. In the top right corner, there is a white-bordered box containing his name and role.

**ACE
FREHLEY**
LEAD GUITAR,
VOCALS

mother's pots and pans, took her forks, butter knives, or wooden spoons, and began banging away. I got addicted to it."

Criss became a Gene Krupa fanatic after hearing the jazz drummer on Benny Goodman's "Sing, Sing, Sing." Criss and his pal Nolan became jazz-heads who would dress in three-piece suits to see the stars of the scene at the Village Vanguard. But hanging in Greenwich Village exposed the pair to more than jazz. They rubbed elbows with the folk singers, soul singers, and girl groups of the day.

By the time Criss had reached his sophomore year of high school, he knew he was a music lifer. He quit school and played any gig he could—

**GENE, PAUL, AND
PETER NEEDED
A FOURTH BAND
MEMBER: A FULL
THROTTLE, TAKE-
NO-PRISONERS,
THIS-ONE-GOES-
TO-11 GUITAR GOD.**

jazz sessions in the Village, lounge sets for wiseguys, cover bands doing the Beatles and Motown. The drummer was committed to his craft, and to the nightlife. That meant coming home at age 17 often reeking of cheap wine. That meant working out crackpot deals with criminals—one backer of a Criss band turned out to be a counterfeiter.

But the nights in the trenches only led to more nights in the trenches. An early act featuring Criss, Chelsea, landed a contract with Decca Records in 1970. But Chelsea fizzled and evolved into the power trio Lips by the end of the year. Then Lips fizzled. In 1972, Criss was 26 and desperate.

"I would have worn pantyhose

and high heels and a Lone Ranger mask, I wanted to make it so bad," he remembered.

Criss posted an ad in *Rolling Stone*. He remembered it as saying: "EXPD. ROCK & roll drummer looking for orig. grp. doing soft & hard music." Simmons, as he recalled in *KISS and Make-Up*, read it as "Drummer available—will do anything," and wanted to test just what "anything" meant.

Simmons called Criss and asked him if he would shave off his facial hair, dress up in woman's clothing, put on makeup. Criss told him he'd play naked. Simmons was intrigued. Stanley and Simmons went to see Criss play, and halfway into a Wilson Pickett cover they both knew he was their guy.

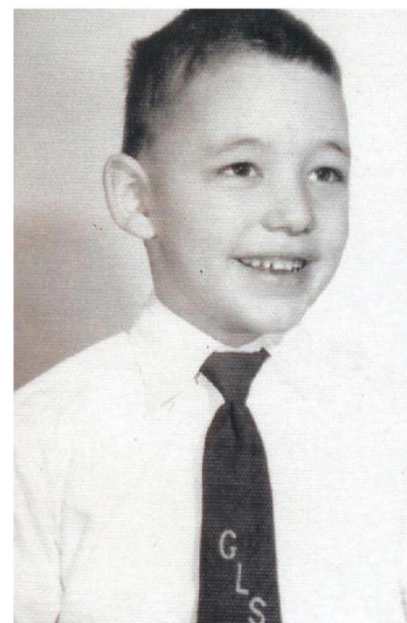
"The crowd was sparse, but something about his performance struck me," Stanley remembered. "He played that bar like it was a packed arena."

The trio of Stanley, Simmons, and Criss auditioned for Epic, the label that had been bullish on Wicked Lester. Epic hated this band. All three knew they needed a fourth, a full-throttle, take-no-prisoners, this-one-goes-to-11 guitar god. The guys put an ad in the December 14, 1972, *Village Voice*: "LEAD GUITARIST WANTED with flash and ability."

PAUL FREHLEY, WHO WOULD become Ace Frehley, the Spaceman, was born April 27, 1951, and raised in the Bronx by a family that valued education and religion, science and art. Frehley's father helped design a backup ignition system for NASA. Frehley's older sister, Nancy, achieved a master's degree in chemistry, and his older brother, Charles, became a star classical guitar student at New York University.

Everyone in the family played an instrument. But unlike the Mozart concertos and the gentle folk the rest of his family loved, Paul, the youngest, fell for electric guitar—and the things it went with in the mid-'60s. In Frehley's case that meant the Rolling Stones, girls, beer, and a little juvenile delinquency.

"By the time I was 14, I was basically spinning out of control," Frehley wrote



THE BAND HAD A HARD TIME finding a lead guitarist until Paul Frehley (top, in first grade; above, in 1968) arrived in mismatched sneakers to audition without waiting his turn. Out of almost 30 hopefuls, Frehley got the gig, going by Ace—a nickname due to his success with girls—because there couldn't be two Pauls. Opposite: Spaceman in the late 1970s.

INITIALLY THE BAND performed as Wicked Lester, when they hadn't yet defined their makeup (below, in 1972, auditioning for Epic Records). After Frehley joined in January 1973, the band became KISS, a name suggested by Paul in contrast to one of Gene's ideas, Crimson Harpoon.

in his 2011 autobiography, *No Regrets: A Rock 'n' Roll Memoir*. "I didn't want to stay home or do my homework, or even go to school, for that matter. I just wanted to hang out with my friends and party."

Frehley got drunk. He picked fights. He joined a gang. Ironically, the rebellion of rock and roll saved Frehley from reform school.

"At the age of 16, I was playing in some decent bands and getting progressively better gigs," he remembered. "At some point along the line I decided that I didn't want to go to jail."

So while a bunch of his friends got locked up, the young guitarist devoted himself to being the next Pete Townshend, Eric Clapton, or Jimi Hendrix. Frehley played with anyone, everyone. "All of my energy went into playing music," he revealed in *No Regrets*. "I was in multiple bands at any given time, juggling gigs, rehearsal, sometimes playing two different venues in a single night. . . . If that meant

throwing on a tux and playing a wedding or bar mitzvah, then that's what I did. If it meant driving up to Kutsher's or one of the other resorts in the Catskill Mountains and playing for families on vacation, then I did that."

By late 1972, the constant gigging added up to next to nothing. While the 21-year-old Frehley could make his guitar sing, scream, and wail, he was penniless and living with mom and dad. Then he saw the ad: "Lead guitarist wanted with flash and ability."

The trio of Simmons, Stanley, and Criss had been auditioning a long string of candidates but none had the right feel. Then Frehley plugged in. Instantly, the quartet felt it. "The combination of the four of us was so much bigger than anything we'd done with the other guitar players," Stanley remembered. "One minute we had been one thing, and a minute later—with this guy named Ace Frehley—we became something else, something undeniable."

"That was the foursome," Simmons echoed. "That was the Beatles on steroids that Paul and I had envisioned."

ON JANUARY 30, 1973, KISS took the stage at the Popcorn Pub in Queens, New York. The place could hold a few hundred people. Half a dozen showed up.

"Nobody was there," Criss remembered in Ken Sharp's 2013 history of the band's early years, *Nothin' To Lose*. "It was a nightmare."

Stanley claimed to be utterly unfazed by the empty room: "Whether there were four people at the first gig or 40,000, it didn't matter. Our path was predetermined. I was completely oblivious to anything other than we were gonna be the biggest band around. Nothing ever seemed like a setback or a detour from that path."

The name KISS had emerged from the ashes of Wicked Lester in 1973. The name came to Stanley in a flash of inspiration, and the rest of the band locked into the idea when Frehley and Stanley scribbled out the legendary logo. But KISS stumbled with their look. First they imitated the New York Dolls, the





cross-dressing proto-punk act that included Criss's old pal Jerry Nolan on drums. Simmons moaned that KISS "looked like grade-B drag queens."

"Ace looked like Shirley MacLaine," Criss laughed because, well, Ace did.

Okay, so no women's frocks. But they had to come up with something striking.

By 1972, glam and shock rock had hit the '60s hippie vibes with a round-house. David Bowie and Alice Cooper experimented with sounds and looks a world away from the Summer of Love. KISS would eventually top the spectacle of Ziggy Stardust and Alice, but it took time to dial in the aesthetic.

Piece by piece, the stage show came together. KISS pioneered hanging a huge background sign advertising the band's name in lights. They adopted all-black costumes to stand out (complete with pants Stanley sewed himself, along with pet-store dog collars). Each member used makeup to hone an alter ego—Stanley becoming the Starchild, Simmons the Demon, Frehley the Spaceman, and Criss the Catman!



"We did some soul-searching and became the characters," Criss recalled in *Nothin' To Lose*. "We knew Gene was always into monsters. Paul was a true rock star, and Ace was definitely from another planet, and I was the cat."

"The images all enhanced or reinforced characteristics in each of us, and in that way, they weren't just costumes," Stanley explained in his memoir. "From

STANLEY AND FREHLEY (TOP) played July 13, 1973, at New York's Hotel Diplomat, where future KISS manager Bill Aucoin first saw the band perform. The band's look was still a work in progress during an early promo shoot (above) taken in the stairwell of their East 23rd Street loft in New York. Gene's light hair was the result of gray-colored spray.



KISS ONSTAGE AT THE Fillmore East in New York City in December 1973, a few months before their first album was released.





CONTINUED FROM PAGE 19

this point on, we began to create a world that we ultimately inhabited and ruled. But at the start, we certainly weren't at the center of anything."

KISS's first few shows at Coventry (formerly the Popcorn Pub) were played with wild enthusiasm, though in front of nearly nobody. But over the first half of 1973, KISS built up a head of steam. The band packed 'em in at the Daisy on Long Island and by summer had begun playing Manhattan clubs.

Still, KISS needed help if they were going to become the Hottest Band in the Land. The guys grabbed a copy of *Billboard's* 1972 year-end issue that listed scores of music agents, executives, and managers. They shipped press kits and free tickets to upcoming shows to a legion of industry movers and shakers. A game show producer responded.

BILL AUCOIN WASN'T A MUSIC manager. The TV exec had produced *Supermarket Sweep*, a contest where shoppers sprinted through a grocery store tossing stuff in their carts. But Aucoin mirrored KISS's single-minded ambition. He told them, "I'm not interested in working with you guys unless you want to be the biggest band in the

world." Aucoin added that he would get them a record deal in three weeks. If he didn't, they could can him.

"That was quite a statement from a guy who had never managed a band," Stanley mused of meeting Aucoin in his New York City office. "But as Bill talked, he struck me as the missing piece of the puzzle. I had the same feeling I'd had when Ace plugged in. Bill was a kindred spirit."

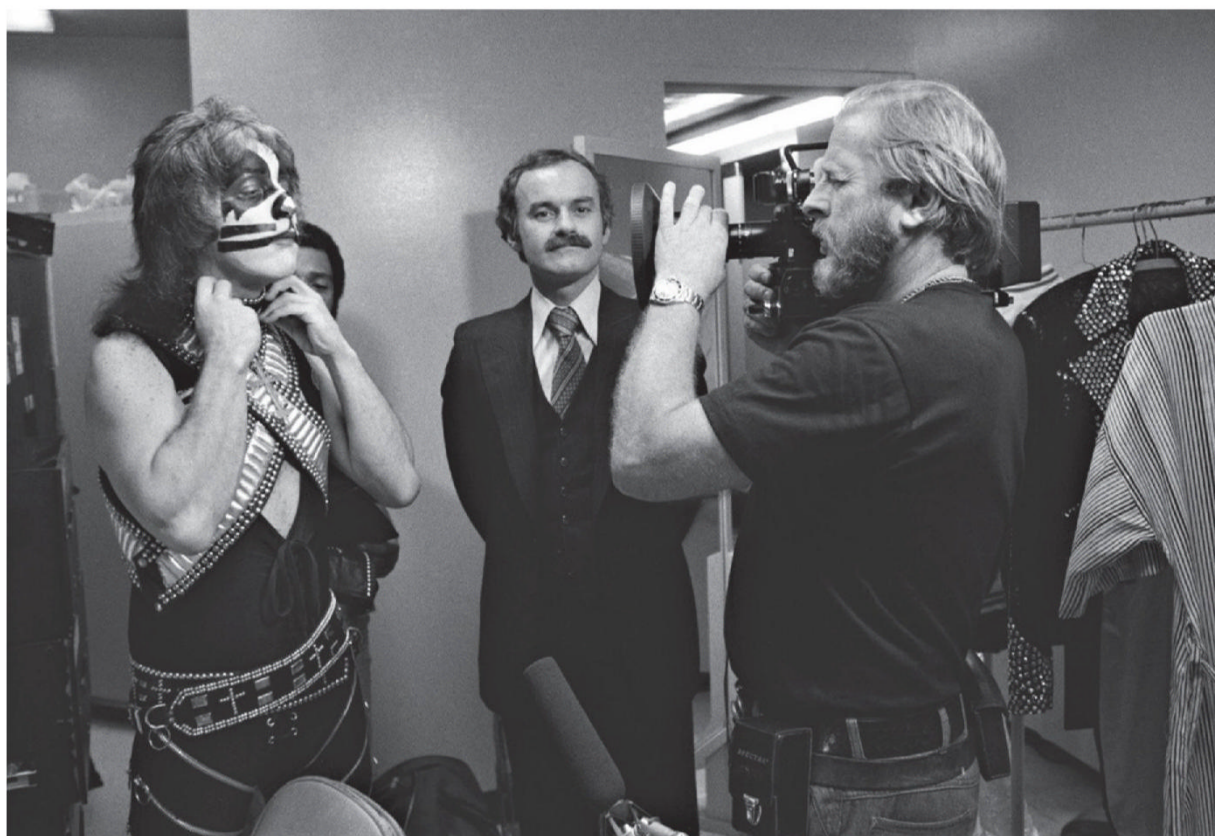
Aucoin became like a fifth member of the band—one willing to fight tooth and nail for KISS's global takeover. Aucoin and business partner (and later wife) Joyce Trabelus hired a magician named Presto to teach Simmons how to breathe fire. They videotaped rehearsals to perfect the foursome's concert choreography. Whatever KISS could brainstorm, Aucoin and his team worked to make it a reality. Fog machines, flash pots, film projections, fake Marshall amps to create the illusion of extra volume, and a levitating drum set? Yes, yes, yes, yes, and yes! "We'd eliminate anything that wasn't cool and keep whatever was great," Criss recalled.

Sometimes the band got too big for its platform boots. Simmons set his hair ablaze the first time he spit fire on stage. Criss, choking on smoke from the

explosions, once passed out atop his levitating drum kit and fell 10 feet into the arms of a well-positioned crew member. Frehley would frequently lose his balance and topple over, leading Simmons and Stanley to run over and finish the jam standing over him like it was all part of the act.

In less than three weeks, Aucoin landed the band a record deal. On November 1, 1973, KISS signed a multi-album agreement with record executive Neil Bogart's new label, Casablanca Records, which would be distributed by Warner Brothers. For a little while, Casablanca's entire roster consisted of KISS.





KISS HUNG OUT WITH Casablanca Records founder Neil Bogart (top). KISS's self-titled debut album (above). Left: NBC filmed Criss and manager Bill Aucoin (center). Opposite: The band in New York on December 31, 1973.

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KISS WANTED TO DO THINGS that had never been seen before, including dressing in all black and having a big sign of their logo in lights. Simmons's look was inspired by his childhood comic books and sci-fi, such as the Marvel character Black Bolt.



“Casablanca bet the store on a new act who didn’t write hit singles, didn’t sing about heartbreak or love, and didn’t look or sound like the Partridge Family,” Simmons recalled in *Nothin’ to Lose*. “All of that had to do with Neil Bogart, a man with a vision.”

Everyone involved in KISS was a different version of P.T. Barnum. The four band members workshopped gimmicks, gags, and rock glory with Bogart, Aucoin, Trabulus, and choreographer-songwriter-road manager Sean Delaney. But none of them had yet to figure out how to translate KISS’s stage charisma to an LP.

Over the course of a couple of years,



**SONGS SUCH
AS “STRUTTER”
AND “DEUCE”
EXEMPLIFIED KISS’S
APPEAL: TAUT,
TOUGH TUNES,
100 PERCENT
MUSCLE AND SNARL.**

Stanley and Simmons put together a pile of songs. The tunes were simple, partly by choice, partly because of the songwriters’ limitations. “We didn’t have the ability to stretch a song out for 15 minutes. You need an extensive musical vocabulary to do that, and we just didn’t have it. It would have been pointless and boring for us to try to stretch out,” Stanley remarked.

But simple worked. Simple was sublime.

Songs such as “Strutter,” “Deuce,” and “Black Diamond” exemplified KISS’s appeal: taut, tough tunes, bruisers, 100 percent muscle and snarl. Frehley contributed a similar gem—the Godzilla stomp “Cold Gin”—to the pile Simmons and Stanley came up with.

On February 18, 1974, the world got to hear those songs when KISS and Casablanca Records dropped the self-titled *KISS*. Or rather, the world would have heard them if people bought the record or radio played the singles. Neither of those things happened, and the album flopped. “[The producers’] job was to capture the energy of the live show on vinyl, but it wasn’t there,” Criss complained.

That may be so, but nonetheless, the album rocks. It has generous helpings of hooks and histrionics, swagger and sleaze. The 10 tracks defined where rock was and where it was going. The LP booms like the Rolling Stones trying to be Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars. It bops like Led Zeppelin doing power pop nuggets. It evokes heavy metal’s thunder and punk’s sneer without falling into the alienating extremes of heavy metal or punk. *KISS* is an all-time perfect rock record.

But winning attention in the crowded rock market of 1974 was a herculean task—the band’s debut came at the height of the Stones’ and Zeppelin’s dominance, as well as at the height of Stones and Zep imitators such as Rod Stewart, Deep Purple, Bad Company, and many more. On top of that, Casablanca’s distributor, Warner, never got KISS. “Warner Brothers called Neil and said, ‘Can you ask KISS to take the makeup off? We don’t believe in it,’” Aucoin said in *Nothin’ to Lose*.

But Aucoin and the band refused, and Bogart backed them. “We hadn’t attracted the attention of major record company executives by playing it safe, and we weren’t about to start doing that now,” Frehley recalled.

KISS would do things their own way, which could be a problem on tour. As a relatively unknown act, KISS spent its first U.S. tour in 1974 opening for headliners such as Blue Öyster Cult and



FOR *DRESSED TO KILL*, THE band’s third album (above), released in 1975, the photographer had them wear makeup and suits, which were borrowed because no one had business clothes. During the same shoot, KISS emerged from the New York City subway.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 31



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**“WE HADN’T
ATTRACTED THE
ATTENTION OF
MAJOR RECORD
COMPANY
EXECUTIVES BY
PLAYING IT SAFE,
AND WE WEREN’T
ABOUT TO START
DOING THAT NOW.”**

—ACE FREHLEY

KISS PERFORMED AT THE
Orpheum Theatre in Boston in
May 1975, two months after
Dressed to Kill was released.








IN JANUARY 1975, KISS posed for a portrait session in Los Angeles.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 26

James Gang. The problem was that KISS had so much wattage (metaphorically and literally, thanks to the stage effects) that some fans would walk out after the band's spectacular opening set.

"We founded a proud tradition of being thrown off of tours," Simmons remembered fondly. "In part this was because we would leave the stage a terrible mess when we were through with it: There would be fake blood all over, and parts of the set would be singed. Once while opening for Black Oak Arkansas, I accidentally set a corner of their curtain on fire. Bands really wanted us off the tour, though, because they couldn't follow us."


**WHEN STANLEY SAID
HE WASN'T INSPIRED
TO WRITE,
AUCOIN TOLD HIM:
"I'LL SHOW YOU
THE BILLS,
AND YOU'LL GET
INSPIRED."**

In addition to the stage show and recordings, television figured an ideal medium for the four natural showmen. They needed time to get the hang of it. In April of 1974, KISS played the nationally broadcast *Mike Douglas Show*. In full Demon-and-tongue mode, Simmons sat for an interview calling himself "evil incarnate." Fellow guest and comedian Totie Fields saw through the makeup to the "nice Jewish boy" beneath, and Stanley considered his bandmate's on-set behavior pretty goofy.

KISS spent the years burning up stages but were a work in progress when it came to making TV appearances and record sales. Looking for a smash that would break the band nationwide, Aucoin and Bogart shipped the band

to L.A. in August of 1974 to make a follow-up record. Stanley complained he wasn't inspired to write but recalled that Aucoin told him: "I'll show you the bills, and you'll get inspired."

Released on October 22, 1974, KISS's second album, *Hotter than Hell*, doubled down on the thump, crunch, and pop of KISS. Critics and fans have complained about the LP's muddy sound. But the craft and fury nearly equaled the band's debut. Once again Stanley and Simmons did the heavy artistic lifting, but Frehley laid down three aces (and his guitar has never sounded better—see "Goin' Blind" and "Strange Ways").

Hotter than Hell bombed worse than the first album. The band's sophomore record crawled to number 100 and the singles missed the charts entirely. KISS, Aucoin, and Casablanca Records limped into 1975 on the verge of bankruptcy. Aucoin tested the limits of his

American Express card and put as much as \$300,000 into KISS—"That was my whole roll, every cent I had," he said.

Bogart thought the antidote to obscurity and financial ruin was an anthem for the ages. He put the band back in the studio, this time in New York City, for album three in February of 1975.

Now acting as producer (to save money), Bogart pushed the band to speed through the sessions. The band did 10 tracks in 10 days to make *Dressed to Kill*. Rushed or not, the band thought it had found its anthem in the album's closer, the Stanley-Simmons' collaboration "Rock and Roll All Nite."

"We felt the energy of it immediately," Simmons remembered. "We had a feeling it was going to be big."

Said Frehley: "The first time we rehearsed 'Rock and Roll All Nite' in the studio, I knew it was a good song. When we actually laid down the track, I had a

ACE TUNED HIS GUITAR before a 1975 show at the Orpheum Theatre in Boston (below). Paul performed that same year in Detroit for the *Alive!* album (opposite).





feeling it would be something special.”

Special? Yes. But big? Nope. Well, not right away.

“Rock and Roll All Nite” stalled at number 68 on the Billboard Hot 100. *Dressed to Kill* managed to make it to number 32, but KISS remained a novelty, a sideshow. They recorded an astonishing three albums in 24 months and couldn’t buy a hit.

“We didn’t become superstars overnight,” Frehley pointed out in *No Regrets*. “People forget that sometimes. Three albums came and went—generating only modest sales and nearly



bankrupting Casablanca Records, Bill Aucoin, and Neil Bogart along the way—before KISS became the juggernaut folks recognize today.”

KISS HAD TO FIND A WAY TO bring the live show to the masses. Aucoin hit on a plan: The ultimate live album that wasn’t entirely live. The KISS camp recruited legendary producer Eddie Kramer, who had engineered albums by Jimi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin. Kramer’s job was to capture, edit, and



SIMMONS ROCKED OUT IN May 1975 at Boston’s Orpheum Theatre. He started pulling his hair back after the band’s first show because it kept falling down and getting caught in his makeup.



enhance the best bits from concerts in Cleveland, Detroit, Iowa, and New Jersey.

“We had to create that album from the live shows with overdubbed guitar, because of the fact that KISS puts on a great show with much leaping about,” Kramer said. “Obviously, guitars will not stay in tune and accuracy goes right out the window. So, you fix what’s not right.”

KISS members used to dispute the elaborate post-concert tinkering that went into 1975’s *Alive!* But they have long since given that up. “People have argued whether *Alive!* is a purely live recording or somehow enhanced. The answer is: Yes, we enhanced it,” Stanley said. “Not to hide anything, not to fool anyone. But who wanted to hear a mistake repeated endlessly? Who wanted to hear an out-of-tune guitar?”

Criss remembered the album as chiefly a studio invention: “In the end we wound up keeping only my drum tracks, my vocals, and Paul’s between-song raps.

Everything else was recreated in the studio.”

All live? Barely live? Fans didn’t care. *Alive!* became the first KISS record to crack the Top 10 and stayed on the charts for more than two years. It unfolded like a greatest-hits album on steroids with crowd noise reenforcing every solid-gold hard-rock gem. It put KISS on the path to becoming the hottest band in the land, and it proved that concert albums could be blockbusters. Peter Frampton’s *Frampton Comes Alive!* and Led Zeppelin’s *The Song Remains the Same* arrived soon afterward.

A fan club formed in late 1975: the KISS Army enlisted tens of thousands of kids. The live version of “Rock and Roll All Nite” put the anthem back on the charts. This time it became a bona fide hit, jumping to number 12. Teenagers sat in their parents’ basements spinning *Alive!* ad nauseam. Groupies threw themselves at the band.



ALIVE! (ABOVE) CAME OUT IN September 1975. KISS backstage before their April 1975 concert in Hartland, Michigan (below), which created a controversy when the arena’s owners allowed 5,000 spectators in a 1,500-capacity space.



KISS AND MAKEUP

WITH A STEADY HAND, PATIENCE, AND PLENTY OF GOO, YOU TOO COULD LOOK LIKE A MEMBER OF THE BAND.

IN THE EARLY 1970S, KISS wanted to be the band they never saw onstage, and that ambition grew into a show rich in pyrotechnics and carnival tricks. But it started by turning everyday clown makeup into rock-and-roll glory. In about two hours of makeup application—in dive-bar bathrooms and first-class

arena suites—plus some time to strap on platform boots and studded leather suits, the band members transformed from regular joes to rock gods.

To replicate KISS's stage makeup, you need more than just time. You need tubs of white clown makeup plus face powder, black eye liner pencils, makeup brushes,

beauticians' combs, pallets of Q-tips, and some Ben Nye Creme Colors Black CL-29 makeup (Simmons's favorite).

Stanley likes to wipe his face with an astringent to close his pores before he starts the makeup process, but Simmons seems to sit down at the mirror and dive right in. Here's how he does

it: After pinning back his hair into a kind of horse's-tail-meets-Spartan-warrior look, Gene covers his face in a coat of the clown goo, slathering it on right over his closed eyes. Once he's got an even coat, he steadies his arm on a counter and uses a makeup pencil to gently mark the outline of the black mask. Then he uses Q-tips—a lot of Q-tips—to remove the white paint inside the outline of the mask.

After applying some powder to set the remaining white makeup, Simmons gets cracking on filling in the mask outline with the Ben Nye black. Simmons says the hardest part is creating a parallel image of the mask design on each side of his face. He makes sure to back away from the mirror to see his work at a distance. He says it's "always about fixing, fixing, and more fixing."

To fill in his lips with black, Simmons goes much deeper into his mouth than any normal person would when applying regular lipstick. The idea is that when he screams and howls, spits blood and breathes fire, nobody can see anything other than dark-as-midnight lips.

To complete the look, Gene deploys a clever hack: "The very last thing I do is I take red Life Savers and I swirl it around in my mouth for half an hour so that when I stick my tongue out, it's blood red."

ACE'S FACE: FREHLEY prepared to meet the masses before a 1977 show in New York City.





MANY RESIDENTS OF Cadillac, Michigan, wore KISS makeup when the band arrived on October 9, 1975, to rock out in the high school gym. Paul swaggered with the majorettes, and the band hung out with the football team and members of the KISS Army.



Members dated Playboy bunnies.

Arguably the peak of KISS mania—or at least of KISS marketing—came on October 9, 1975, when the band literally descended on Cadillac, Michigan, in limousines. To celebrate the high school football team's win streak (which had been blasting KISS in the locker room), the whole school, the mayor, and the local police and fire departments welcomed the band dressed in their makeup. The town went so far as to rename a road KISS Boulevard. It "was like landing on planet KISS," Simmons said. The band departed town by helicopter, dropping flyers that read

CADILLAC HIGH: KISS LOVES YOU!

KISS entered 1976 a full-fledged phenomenon. Stanley and Simmons, the geeky outsiders with Fab Four-sized dreams, had clawed their way to rock-god status. But they knew they couldn't rest. They had to make sure they wouldn't be a short-lived success or a disposable fad.

"Almost overnight we went from being a working band with a record contract and a devoted following to being national superstars," Simmons recollected. "After the massive success of *Alive!*, we knew that we had to deliver a grand statement." ■







1976 — 1980

ROCK AND ROLL ALL NITE



**A FEROCIOUS TOUR SCHEDULE
AND KILLER ALBUMS LED TO ROCK
STAR SUCCESS: CUSTOM GUITARS,
FANCY CARS, AND, FOR ACE AND
PETER, A DEBILITATING EXCESS.**



KISS PERFORMED IN 1978, the year of solo albums by each member and a campy, cult-classic TV movie on NBC.



PRODUCER BOB EZRIN ran the sessions for KISS's *Destroyer* album like a camp counselor—complete with a whistle hung around his neck.

Paul, Gene, Ace, and Peter were rock stars. Ezrin was an auteur. The producer helmed Alice Cooper's best records, often arranging and cowriting key tracks. But Ezrin had also worked with more experimental artists such as Lou Reed and New Orleans piano wizard Dr. John. Ezrin's demand for perfection and innovation elevated March 15, 1976's *Destroyer* above the rough and raw early LPs.

"What George Martin was to the Beatles, Bob Ezrin was to us," Simmons recalled. "Much of the success of *Destroyer* had to do with Bob's bravery, particularly his interest in introducing new elements into our music."

Those new elements included a choir, a symphony orchestra, some cabaret piano, and sound effects such as a car crash on "Detroit Rock City" and screaming children on "God of Thunder." But Ezrin's real impact can be felt in the arranging and songwriting. He earned cowriting credits on the album's standout tracks "Detroit Rock City," "Shout It Out Loud," and "Beth."

"One of the most significant things he did was challenge us not to write 'fuck me suck me' songs," Stanley remembered. "And as we worked on lyrics, he had no problem saying very plainly, 'No, I don't like that.' I would have never written a lyric like 'Detroit Rock City' without Bob upping our game. He pushed us far beyond our limits."

The producer didn't stop at reworking song lyrics and melodies. "Working with Ezrin was the hardest experience

KISS RECORDED THEIR fourth studio album, *Destroyer*, at A&R Studios in New York in January 1976 with producer Bob Ezrin (below, center), who took a firm hand, carrying a whistle and saying "Campers!" when he wanted their attention. Opposite: Simmons and Frehley that same year.







of my life,” Criss recalled. “Ezrin actually wrote out every drum part for me and came up with some very intricate drumming that wasn’t even in my musical style. I was a meat-and-potatoes, Charlie Watts, Motown-type of guy. Ezrin demanded complexity, so I got frustrated very fast that I wasn’t

giving Bob what he wanted.”

Frehley also clashed with the producer. Because of their disagreements, and because of the guitarist’s hard partying, Frehley went AWOL for some sessions, leaving Ezrin to fill in some of his parts with studio musicians.

Frehley and Criss had been party

animals since their teenage years. Meanwhile, Stanley and Simmons skipped drugs for extra helpings of sex and rock and roll. The lifestyle differences, on top of intense personality conflicts, contributed to the bickering between bandmates that had become a chronic problem. As KISS accelerated



KISS ENJOYED THE SPECTACLE of walking around in makeup and stage costumes in the days when they didn't reveal their faces. In 1976, they attracted attention in New York (above) and chatted with a police officer (right).

into the late '70s, the spats erupted with a new ferocity. The cracks within the original KISS lineup were starting to show. Not that fans could see them—how could they, between the grease paint, pyro, and hit records? Propelled by the Top 10 ballad “Beth” and the concert staple “Shout It Out Loud,” *Destroyer* became KISS's highest charting, best-selling studio album by a country mile.

The band spent 1976 and 1977 repeating the formula of their first two years, which meant scorched-earth touring and recording at an absolutely furious pace. Over 19 months they pumped out three studio records, *Destroyer* (March 15, 1976), *Rock and Roll Over* (November 11, 1976), and *Love Gun* (June 30, 1977), plus another world-beating live set, *Alive II* (October 14, 1977). The difference this time around: Everything the band did garnered attention and adulation from the growing and ravenous KISS Army.

“There’s a myth out there that we took part in a grand plan right from the beginning,” Stanley reflected. “That is not the truth. We were clueless about merchandising. . . . All we provided at first was the template—the music was

ours, the makeup was ours, but so much of the rest was Bill’s.”

To satiate the Army’s never-ending hunger, Aucoin and the KISS team turned out merchandise with astonishing speed. Every band sold T-shirts, but what about jewelry and belt buckles, action figures and Halloween costumes? What about KISS-branded bubble gum cards, pinball machines, and a comic book complete with vials of the band members’ blood mixed into the ink? And why not mail-order forms to buy merchandise slipped right inside LP jackets?

“Sometimes I wondered how far would be too far—were there things we shouldn’t do?” Stanley mused. “But at that point the answer was no. It all seemed good. Phenomenal, even: KISS radios, KISS motorcycles, KISS lunch boxes.”

Simmons knew the other members had limits but, an entrepreneur extraordinaire, Simmons green-lit stuff with glee: “Ace and Peter didn’t like it, because they didn’t see the big picture. But even Paul was a little reluctant . . . I just plow straight ahead and do it, whether it’s KISS My Ass toilet paper or KISSTORY books or whatever.”

CONTINUED ON PAGE 48







DURING A 1976 PHOTO SHOOT in Los Angeles for *Creem* magazine, Frehley was so out of it due to substance abuse that rock-and-roll photographer Neal Preston had to move quickly to get a usable shot. It didn't take long for Ace to end up face first in the fake snow.

If anyone accused KISS of being sellouts, Simmons countered: “That’s right, we sell out every night.”

KISS carved out a healthy market share in basketball arenas, on record shop shelves, in grocery store aisles, and on TV. On October 29, 1976, KISS performed on *The Paul Lynde Halloween Special*. A week later, the Eddie Kramer-produced *Rock and Roll Over* shipped platinum, meaning Casablanca was so sure it would be a smash they mailed a million copies to record stores. During the first half of 1977, KISS headlined Madison Square Garden, won a People’s Choice Award for “Beth,” and were voted America’s number-one band in a Gallup Poll.

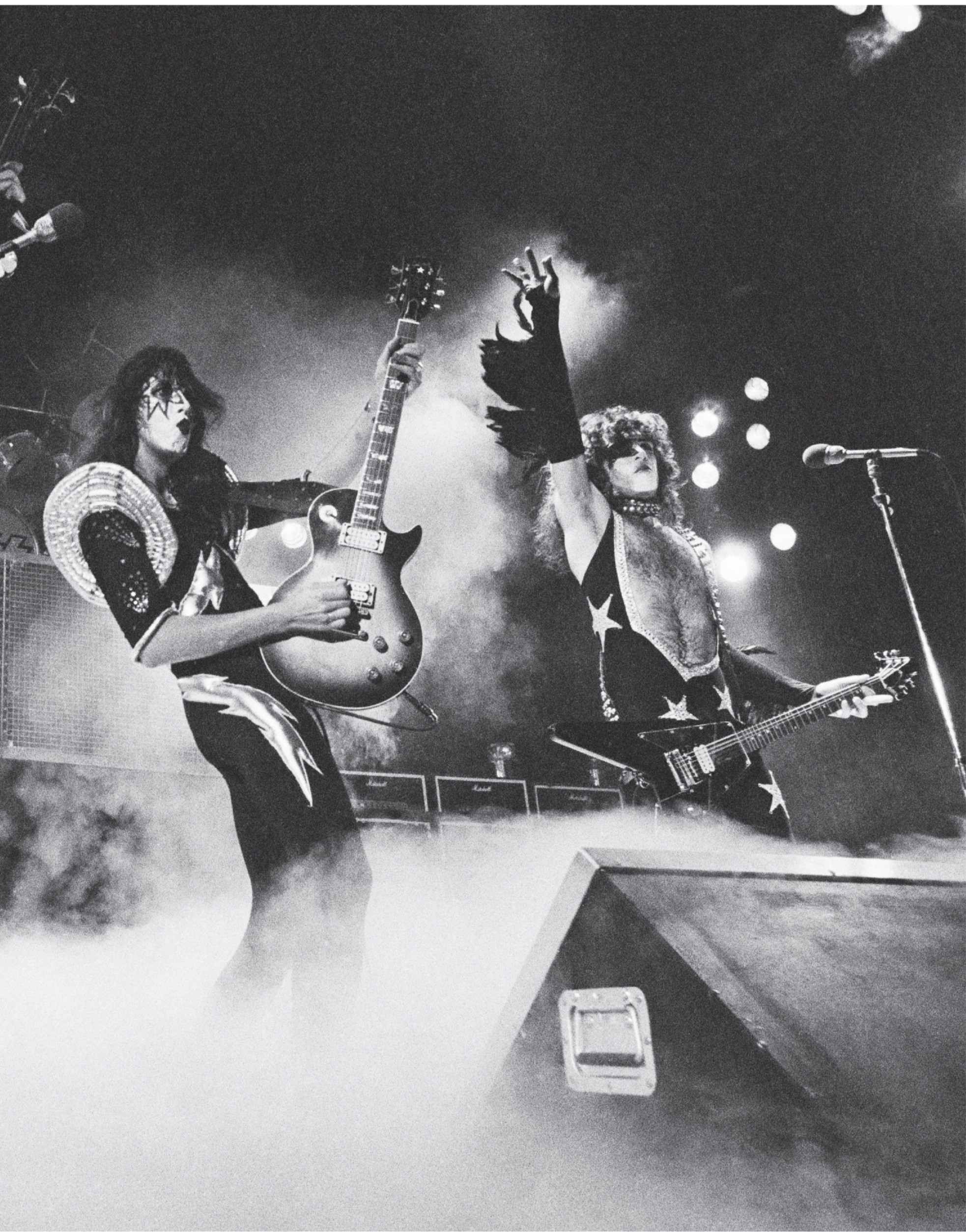
**“I WONDERED
HOW FAR WOULD
BE TOO FAR—WERE
THERE THINGS
WE SHOULDN’T DO?”
STANLEY MUSED.
“AT THAT POINT,
THE ANSWER
WAS NO.”**

“Throughout the last half of the ’70s, KISS operated as the biggest band in the world,” critic and KISS superfan Chuck Klosterman wrote in *Grantland*. “Not because of record sales (groups like Fleetwood Mac and the Eagles sold way, way more). KISS simply declared that their enormity was reality, and reality elected to agree.”

The investments in pyro and levitating drum sets finally started paying dividends—between 1977 and 1979, KISS raked in \$100 million (more than \$400 million today). The members slipped naturally into their status as newly minted millionaires. They bought \$2,000 guitars, houses for their parents,



**SIMMONS, FREHLEY,
and Stanley circa 1977.**





and fleets of cars: Mercedeses, Camaros, DeLoreans.

Perhaps inevitably, with this level of attention and popularity, KISS started attracting foes as well as fans.

“At that time misinformation about the band began to spread in the southern Bible Belt states, including a rumor that the name KISS stood for Knights In Satan’s Service, and the four of us were devil worshipers,” Simmons remembered.

Of course, the Demon did nothing to dispel the whispers and fears. If being associated with Lucifer fed KISS fever and fueled record sales, Simmons wasn’t about to correct anyone. Stanley laughed off the growing presence of religious groups protesting KISS shows—noting that quite a few celebrity television evangelists shared KISS’s penchant for passing time with ladies in hotel rooms.

Devil worshipers? No. Hell on wheels? Yes.

As KISS charged through a string of 1977 hits—*Love Gun* took over where *Rock and Roll Over* left off—Criss hit a

wall, literally. The only married member of the band, Criss, as he recounts in *Makeup to Breakup*, had spent much of his time on the road cheating on his wife, Lydia. By the late ’70s, the relationship was on the rocks and Criss had started his tailspin.

After a night of partying and a fight with Lydia, Criss rammed his Camaro into the wall of a garage so many times it caught fire. When the police arrived, they looked in the car and found drugs, a switchblade, and a .38-caliber revolver. Aucoin talked Criss out of the jam, but the trouble with the drummer would soon be too much for the manager to handle. In fact, everything was becoming too much. A combination of a rabid fan base and an overzealous marketing team led to absurd highs and lows.


Hoping to cash in on Halloween hype, NBC aired *Kiss Meets the Phantom of the Park* on October 28, 1978. Produced by cartoonmaker Hanna-Barbera, the movie starred KISS as superhero versions of themselves battling evil robots in an amusement park. “How could anyone make this shit up?”



RELEASED IN 1977, *ALIVE II* featured live performances from Los Angeles and Japan.

CRISS AND SIMMONS
took in the scenery during
a tour of Japan in 1977 (left).
Simmons circa 1978.





STANLEY'S STAR WAS Frehley's idea. As a solitary child, Stanley had drawn stars, which now represented belonging. In his memoir, Stanley wrote, "From the very beginning, I felt part of something with KISS. . . . I wasn't as lonely as I'd always been."



SIMMONS FIRST PERFORMED his fire trick at the Academy of Music on December 31, 1973, during "Firehouse." He emerged from stage fog with a mouth full of kerosene that collided with a lit sword to produce a fireball. The crowd loved the flash; Simmons's hair did not. It caught fire from all of the hair spray he used to puff out his mane.



SIMMONS BACKSTAGE IN Japan in 1978 covered with a stage-blood concoction of eggs, strawberry syrup, and red food coloring.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 50

Frehley questioned incredulously.

KISS couldn't act. Critics noticed. The *Los Angeles Times* labeled *Kiss Meets the Phantom of the Park* "a four-star abomination. A five-minute idea for a cartoon, disguised as a two-hour movie."

"We knew nothing about acting, nothing about filmmaking," Stanley admitted to the *Hollywood Reporter* years later. "We were sold the idea of the film in a sentence that was virtually, 'A *Hard Day's Night* meets *Star Wars*.' Well, it was far from either."

Frehley saw the film, which can

be deliciously campy and fun, as the beginning of the end: "To be honest, I thought it was a natural step in the devolution of KISS. We got exactly what we deserved, and exactly what most people expected."

With the band fraying and Frehley threatening to leave, Aucoin thought four solo projects would give the members some space (and maybe massage everyone's egos). To link them to KISS and one another, the same artist did all the cover art—each a painting of the members' alter egos—and



albums were released on the same day, September 18, 1978.

None of the albums met commercial expectations. *Gene Simmons* hit number 22, *Ace Frehley* number 26, *Paul Stanley* number 40, and *Peter Criss* number 43. But the albums (three of them, at least) offered a few rewards. Stanley and Frehley riffed on KISS's tried-and-true sound, and their LPs were generally considered artistic successes. The hard-charging *Ace Frehley*, with its enduring cover of "New York Groove" is often (rightly) held up as one



IN 1978, AMID GROWING tensions in the band and the chaotic filming of *KISS Meets the Phantom of the Park*, each of the four released a solo album with cover art by the same artist.

of the best things the guys, together or solo, ever produced. In unsurprising fashion, the Demon did whatever the hell he wanted on *Gene Simmons*, which meant working with current love interest Cher and recording an odd, earnest, string-heavy version of "When You Wish upon a Star." Criss's vanity project found few defenders. In its review of *Peter Criss*, the website Ultimate Classic Rock later wrote, "it must be said he simply doesn't have the songwriting talent or charisma to front an entire album."

Coming into 1979, KISS had lost the cohesiveness that had lifted the band to its height. Stanley and Simmons constantly wondered if Criss and Frehley were committed to the band, planned on jumping ship, or were too stoned to care one way or the other. On the Halloween broadcast of Tom Snyder's *The Tomorrow Show*, Simmons and Stanley tried to steer the conversation in a PG direction, while Criss celebrated his gun collection and Frehley constantly cackled like the Joker. (To be fair, the spaced-out Spaceman was absolutely hilarious.) On TV, the guitarist and drummer came off as lovable hams; behind the scenes, they were a mess.

KISS went disco in 1979, or tried to. "I Was Made for Lovin' You" is a wide-angle disco caricature with a paint-by-numbers guitar solo; it sounds like what would happen if you hauled a \$79 Casio keyboard into a cave and hit the 'Disco' function," critic Chuck

Klosterman wrote of the number-11 hit written by Stanley and hair-metal songwriting guru Desmond Child.

The album that launched that single, *Dynasty*, went platinum weeks after its May 23, 1979, release. But it got mixed reviews from fans, terrible reviews from critics, and Criss hated it—partly because he got replaced by a session drummer in the studio. "I was burnt out on KISS. I was sick of playing disco songs and selling Barbie dolls," Criss said. "Between the drugs and my marriage dissolving, I was a wreck. Ace was almost as bad with his drinking. Gene and Paul's egos were cascading out of control."

It's hard to dispute Criss complaints. It's also hard to dispute that Criss was no longer capable of sitting behind the kit in the studio or in front of thousands of fans night after night. Things were so bleak that after one show Criss attacked Simmons with a broken champagne bottle before being pulled away by the crew.

In 1980, the band voted Criss out. While he appeared on the cover art for *Unmasked*, he didn't play on the record—session musician and future David Letterman house band drummer Anton Fig slid into his place. KISS would never be the same. Everyone knew that. The band had dominated in the 1970s, but at the dawn of 1980s KISS was adrift.

"The rules had changed," Stanley noted. "KISS clearly wasn't going to continue as it had." ■

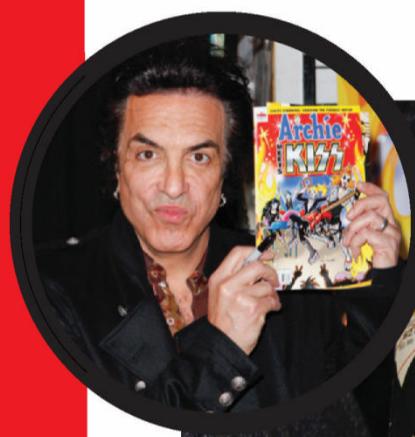
THE HOTTEST BRAND IN THE WORLD

A KINGDOM OF KISS MERCHANDISE

HERE'S THE SIMPLE BUSINESS PRINCIPLE: EVERYTHING LOOKS COOLER WITH KISS ON IT.

GENE SIMMONS IS KISS'S GREATEST CHAMPION.

He's also an unapologetic capitalist. Some might say a huckster. Call it what you like, Simmons doesn't mind. KISS is happy to have their name on anything and everything, and Simmons encourages every band to do the same if they can. ("They all come around to our way of doing it. Cherry Garcia, baby. The hippies lost.") How far will the band take the "anything and everything" mantra? Reflecting on the fact that fans could buy a KISS Kondom as well as a KISS-adorned casket, Simmons has observed: "We'll get you coming and we'll get you going."



▲ KISS comic books

No one can say KISS didn't bleed for its fans. In 1977, Marvel created the band's first comic book—with the band members mixing vials of their blood into the ink. The "Super Special" comic sold 500,000 copies, then a Marvel record. The comic books that followed included crossovers with Archie as well as work with comics cult hero Todd McFarlane.

▼ KISS pinball machines

Pinball giant Bally started rolling out versions of band-branded machines in the '70s. Various iterations were produced for decades—including soundtracks of KISS songs—and they don't come cheap. Mint-condition machines run more than \$10,000.





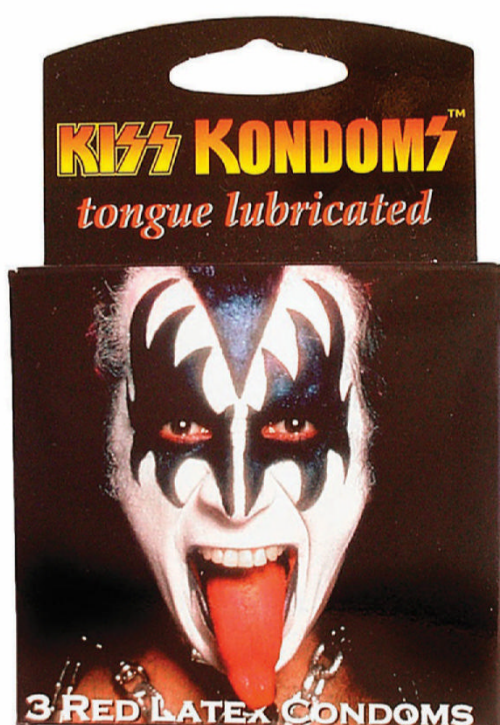
◀ KISS Coffeehouse

If you rock-and-rolled all nite in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, between 2006 and 2013, you could get a morning pick-me-up at this café. Featured menu items included a French KISS Vanilla and a KISS Frozen Rockuccino.



▲ KISS lunch boxes

The best way to shout it out loud that you're a fan in 1977? Take a seat at your elementary school cafeteria and pull your PB&J out of a *Destroyer*-themed lunch box. A KISS lunch box is such a cultural touchstone that the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History has one in its collection.



▲ KISS Kondoms

Does the image of Gene Simmons's extended tongue get you in the mood? Try these electric-red lubricated latex condoms featuring Simmons in full Demon mode.

▼ KISS Hello Kitty dolls

Do you love KISS? Do you also love Hello Kitty? Thankfully the band has that rare Venn diagram covered with snugly Hello Kitty versions of Demon, Starchild, Spaceman, and Catman.



▲ 2014 KISS scooter

What kind of transportation does the music of KISS evoke? A Harley-Davidson? A Camaro? An F-16 fighter jet? Yes, yes, and yes! But for the more relaxed fan who wants to tool around Detroit Rock City at 30 miles per hour, there's this CrossRunner scooter.



1980 — 1990

LICK IT UP



**THERE WAS A NEW LINEUP,
A NEW LOOK—THE MAKEUP CAME
OFF!—AND GENE'S FORAY INTO
HOLLYWOOD. STILL, KISS KEPT
THEIR MOJO VERY MUCH ALIVE.**





BY 1982, VINNIE VINCENT, center, had replaced original guitarist Frehley, who credited Stanley with trying to convince him, unsuccessfully, to stay.

PAUL CARAVELLO WANTED Gene Simmons's autograph. And Caravello wanted it while auditioning to be KISS's new drummer.

Caravello was one of hundreds of hopefuls looking to fill Peter Criss's platform boots. But instead of bringing his ego into the audition, Caravello struck Simmons and Stanley as a sweetheart—and a hell of a good player. The two KISS leaders liked the drummer and appliance repairman so much that after asking him to join the band, they bought him a Porsche so that he would, as Stanley put it, “know he wouldn't be a second-class citizen in KISS.”

Caravello was rechristened Eric Carr, the Fox, in time for an international tour supporting *Unmasked*—a disorienting album title given that KISS was, as always, in full makeup. The LP of sharp rock tunes and power pop nuggets bombed in the U.S. but exploded abroad, with “Shandi” becoming a blockbuster single in Australia, Norway, and half a dozen other countries. KISS's first trip to Australia in 1980 had the fanfare of the Beatles' invasion of the States in 1964.

“Australia was like nothing we'd ever experienced,” Stanley recalled. “Huge here meant not being able to leave the hotel. It meant taking a helicopter from the hotel to the stadium we were playing. . . . We had an entire floor of the hotel, with one suite devoted to our own Australian public relations staff. And no wonder, since we were on the front page of the newspapers every day.”

Instead of using the overseas sellouts to springboard into the '80s, the band mired itself in a '70s cultural hangover. As it yo-yoed between styles looking for relevance, KISS had key members in its camp looking for highs beyond the record charts.

Frehley was bottoming out and didn't feel a connection with Carr. Ace, in *No Regrets*, recalled getting Carr to buy him a few tubes of glue, even knowing Carr wouldn't sniff the stuff with him. Huffing glue was not the only damaging thing Frehley was doing in the early '80s. While Stanley and Simmons kept their heads clear and noses clean, many in the KISS orbit—Frehley, Aucoin, Bogart, and producer Bob Ezrin—were snorting mountains of cocaine.



SOME 2,000 YOUNG MEMBERS of Australia's KISS Army showed their devotion in 1980 (above). Stanley and Frehley performed the same year (left).



Maybe the drugs were to blame for KISS's weirdest project yet—yes, weirder than *KISS Meets the Phantom of the Park*. The band brought Ezrin back into the fold hoping to make something akin to *Destroyer II*. What the team landed on was 1981's *Music from "The Elder,"* a concept album and rock opera about... What? Nobody knows exactly. (Best guess is the plot is a riff on *The Sword in the Stone*—style chosen-one mythology. There's a Council of Elders. There's an Order of the Rose.)

"As anyone who knows rock and roll can tell you, concept records can be career killers," Frehley noted. "The problem is that instead of ending up with a masterpiece like *Tommy*, you could end up with *Saucy Jack*, Spiñal Tap's unproduced rock opera about Jack the Ripper."

Full of medieval woodwinds, strings, harps, and prog synthesizers, *Music from "The Elder"* was Spiñal Tap on a bad day. The LP broadsided fans and critics. It limped to number 75 (the

band's worst peak chart position since 1974). *Rolling Stone* summed up what many were thinking: "What could be less promising at this stage of the game than a concept album by KISS? After having written off KISS as pure pap for eight-year-olds, who even wants to think about taking them seriously?"

Stanley came across a poster promoting the album in a record shop. Merely glimpsing it gave him a panic attack. "The songs we recorded had no teeth," Stanley lamented. "We were gumming

the music at that point. We had forsaken everything we loved and embraced. We were intoxicated with fame and success. We were no longer the band everyone loved—and clearly we didn’t love that band anymore either.”

Intoxicated with more than fame and success, Frehley had had enough of KISS. The guitarist had “settled down” by the ’80s. He married Jeanette Trerotola in 1976, and their daughter, Monique, came along in 1980. But Frehley’s appetite for pills, powders, and booze wouldn’t be put on hold for domestic life.

After booze, he smashed his Porsche into an oak tree. On quaaludes, Frehley rammed his monster truck through his house and into his baby’s bedroom. He capped off a bender by leading the police on a high-speed chase against traffic on the Bronx River Parkway.

Stanley tried to convince Frehley to stick with KISS. He failed, and

then there were two.

Not even Bogart and Aucoin remained from the early years—Bogart died after a short battle with cancer in 1982; Aucoin was fired that same year. After a disco record, pop LP, and concept album, KISS tried to reinvent itself as a modern heavy-metal juggernaut on 1982’s *Creatures of the Night*. The songs were louder, faster, and full of bombastic guitar solos. Frehley appeared on the cover, but an unknown metal shredder named Vincent Cusano played most of the fleet-fingered leads.

Now regarded as a KISS classic by diehards, the album represented a ping-ponging between styles that left many baffled. Simmons and Stanley couldn’t find their way into the MTV era. With Cusano, now Vinnie Vincent, wearing Egyptian Ankh Warrior makeup, the new lineup tried to resurrect the ’70s spectacle after deciding not to promote *Music from “The Elder”* on the road.

SIMMONS, FREHLEY, AND Stanley played together toward the end of Frehley’s time with KISS (below). Eric Carr (opposite) joined the band in 1980 after original drummer Criss was fired.





“We liked *Creatures of the Night* and hoped for the best. But the album did poorly,” Simmons admitted. “We booked an American tour, and it was the least successful tour we’d ever done. The music scene was changing: Acts like Michael Jackson and the Clash were in ascent, and no one showed up to hear us play.”

It was time for KISS’s most radical transformation.

ON SEPTEMBER 18, 1983, THE new lineup sat for an MTV exclusive without their makeup—a watershed moment for the band. The interview had Stanley announcing, “It just felt like the right time to do it. The band

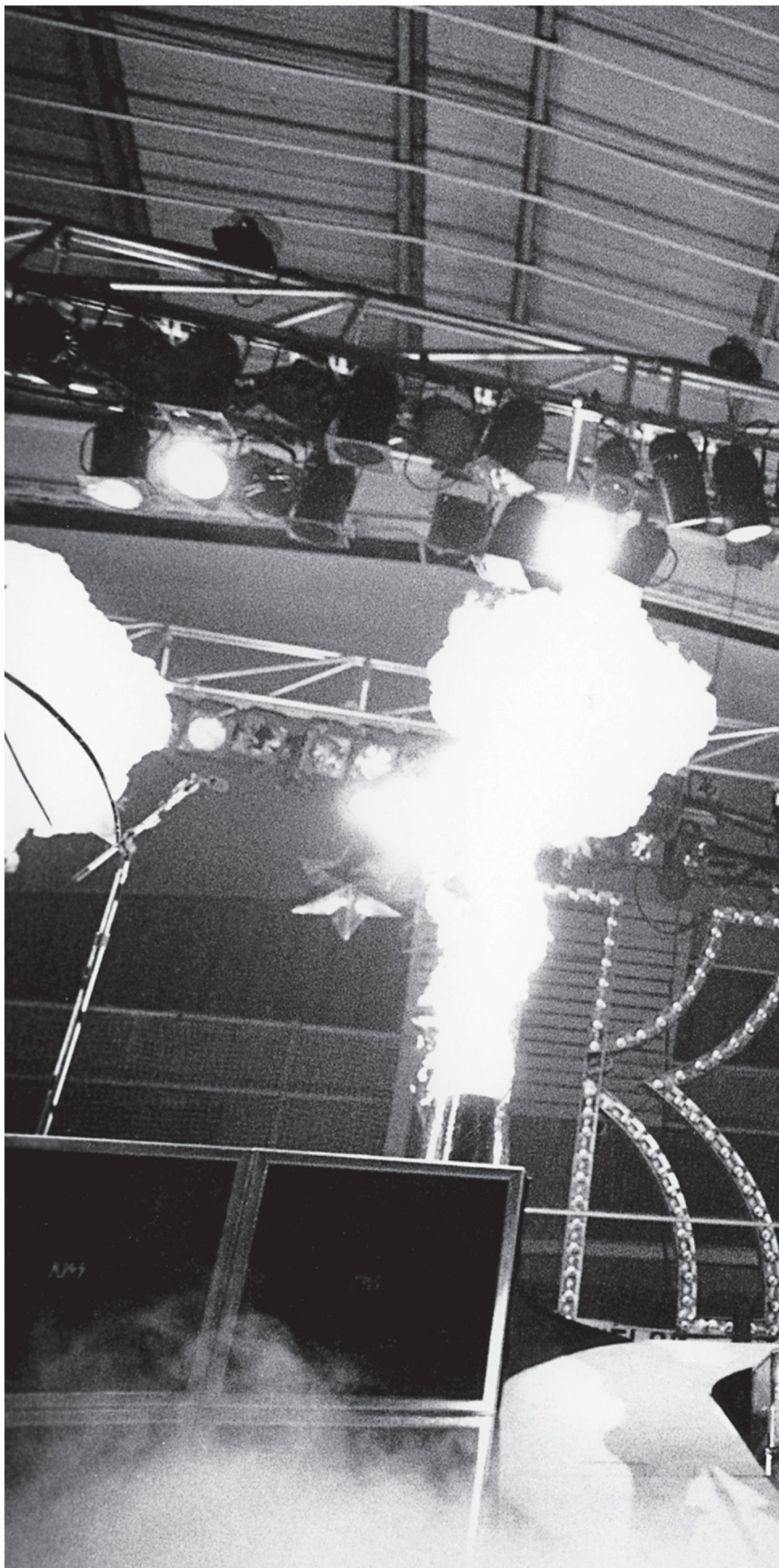

**MUSIC FROM
“THE ELDER” WAS
A CONCEPT ALBUM
AND ROCK OPERA,
AND KISS’S
WEIRDEST PROJECT
YET.**

feels so strong.” Simmons tried to reinforce his partner’s enthusiasm: “KISS is still KISS.” In reality, Stanley thought taking off the makeup was their only card left to play.

“People were tired of what KISS had become,” Stanley confessed. “With the new characters, we were one step removed from Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. I mean, what the hell was Vinnie’s ankh about? Rather than keeping the original personas and images alive, we had become a ridiculous menagerie. What was next? Turtle Boy?”

“It wasn’t a brave or noble move because it wasn’t done from a place of strength,” he added. “We were backed into a corner.”

MTV didn’t want anything to do





WITH HIS DISTINCTIVE makeup and famous tongue, Simmons was often the band member immediately associated with KISS—which he never discouraged. He was used to attention. In his memoir, Simmons wrote that his mother doted on her only child: “I guess you could say she spoiled me. While this was great for me, it wasn’t always great for the people who met me.”

VINCENT, SIMMONS, STANLEY, and Carr in Germany in November 1983, two months after officially revealing their makeup-free faces on MTV.



with KISS before the unmasking. The band had sent the network clips; MTV ignored them. But the publicity stunt of KISS removing the makeup got MTV's attention and earned the band a place on what was then the hottest channel in America.

The title track to 1983's *Lick It Up*, the lead single from KISS's first album without makeup, got some MTV airplay but topped out at a lowly number 66 on the Hot 100. The hype pushed the album to number 24, not bad, but numbers more akin to a release by a middling band like Great White or Dokken. KISS had gone from icons to a moderately successful

hair band in a forest of hair bands.

KISS's troubles on the charts mirrored their personnel issues. The group flirted with pie-in-the-sky ideas such as replacing Frehley with Eddie Van Halen or maybe a teenage Slash, but settled on Vincent, mostly because the band needed a warm body in a hurry. Vincent could shred face-melting solos in the modern metal style that updated KISS's sound. He could write—he co-wrote most of the *Lick It Up* tracks. But Stanley knew early on Vincent was only a placeholder.

"The problem was that he had no sense of what to play or when," Stanley

remarked about Vincent's overindulgent solos during KISS concerts. "His playing was like puking—it just came splattering out."

Soon Vincent was out; Mark St. John was in. Then, after St. John struggled with arthritis, he was out and Bruce Kulick was in. KISS cycled through four guitarists in three years. Stanley and Simmons expended loads of energy just trying to keep a stable lineup. Or rather, Stanley did.

"Gene had basically disappeared by that point, too," Stanley lamented when Simmons turned his eye toward Hollywood. "I felt abandoned when it



1983'S *LICK IT UP* WAS THE band's first non-makeup album and the first to go gold since *KISS Unmasked* in 1980. The band played in Chicago in 1984 (top).

came time to make *Animalize*.”

“And it wasn’t like he was making *Gone with the Wind*,” Stanley joked in *Rolling Stone*. “Some of it was more like passing wind! But what I resented was just being informed and then working to his plan. It didn’t seem fair.”

KISS would pump out four albums through the close of 1980s—1984’s *Animalize*, 1985’s *Asylum*, 1987’s *Crazy Nights*, and 1989’s *Hot in the Shade*. Stanley did a lot of the artistic heavy lifting on the albums, but many questioned how “artistic” the output was. While the band spun off minor hits and gold records, most of KISS’s mid-to-late-’80s work chased trends and leaned hard on outside songwriters, including Michael Bolton and Diane Warren.

Simmons didn’t notice or didn’t care about the creative and commercial slide—“Paul was in his prime,” Simmons confessed. “For those couple of years it became more his band.” Simmons wanted to be a Hollywood star, so he (kinda) became one.

In 1983, Simmons walked into a casting agency in Hollywood and announced, “I’d like to be in movies.” The pitch worked. Writer-director Michael Crichton cast him as the villain in what looked to be a blockbuster—1984’s big-budget sci-fi flick

Runaway, starring Tom Selleck at the height of his *Magnum, P.I.* fame. The movie, though, was DOA and Simmons, to put it gently, didn’t garner any Oscar consideration: “Mr. Simmons, of the rock group KISS, has for years been wearing stage makeup to do exactly what he does here without it: sneer and glower,” *New York Times* critic Janet Maslin wrote.

But Simmons had never listened to anyone but himself, so he plowed ahead in a series of B films. *Never Too Young to Die* featured him as psychopathic gang leader Velvet Von Ragnar facing off against John Stamos. In *Wanted: Dead or Alive*, he played psychopathic terrorist Malak Al Rahim taking on Rutger Hauer (psychopaths being Simmons’s wheelhouse).

Simmons wouldn’t compete with Arnold Schwarzenegger, but he loved his Hollywood holiday. When he wasn’t in front of a crowd of thousands on stage or on set, he was at the Playboy Mansion. At one of Hugh Hefner’s legendary bashes in 1984, Simmons spotted one of *Playboy*’s most famous models, Shannon Tweed, who captivated him. A serial celebrity dater, Simmons broke off his relationship with Diana Ross to court Tweed.

“She was everything I never knew



I wanted in a girl,” Simmons gushed in his memoir. “Shannon disarmed me because everything about her was so honest. There were no games, no hidden agendas. If that isn’t enough, Shannon was and continues to be the most striking woman I have ever seen in my life.” Nearly 40 years after their first encounter, Simmons and Tweed are still together, married with two children.

Simmons couldn’t conquer

Hollywood. Stanley couldn’t get KISS up to Def Leppard or Bon Jovi levels. “Despite selling 2 million copies each of *Lick It Up* and *Animalize*, we certainly weren’t top dogs anymore,” Stanley pointed out. But they still had the attention of a diminished-but-substantial army of fans. Criss and Frehley found life without KISS didn’t come with a built-in audience.

Criss wasted no time launching, or

trying to launch, a solo career. In 1980, he released the aptly titled *Out of Control*. The first song, an adult contemporary ballad titled “By Myself,” opened with the lines “*By myself, starting over again / By myself, looks like this time I’m on my own / Starting over again.*”

“By Myself” is like a self-explanatory biography,” Criss told *Billboard* at the time. “It says I’m going to make it on my own.”

SIMMONS, CARR, STANLEY, and guitarist Bruce Kulick (in white) relaxed during a video shoot in 1986. Before meeting Shannon Tweed (right), Simmons never wanted a relationship or children. Kirstie Alley and Simmons shared a scene in the 1984 movie *Runaway* (lower right).



But in terms of selling records, Criss couldn't make it on his own. *Out of Control* sank like a stone, and the follow-up record, 1982's *Let Me Rock You*, didn't fare any better. Criss's first marriage had fallen apart and his second, to *Playboy* model Debra Jensen, started on rocky ground—on their wedding day, both were high on cocaine before taking their vows.

"It was a crushing blow that my two

albums had failed," Criss confessed. "I delved deeper and deeper into cocaine addiction."

Criss also drank and took pills. He locked his drums away in his attic, spending more time with his firearm collection. After Criss shot up the house and nearly got into a gunfight with a squad of cops who came to investigate, his new wife and daughter, Jenilee, moved out. Criss went on

a series of weeklong benders until he finally called a friend: "Get over here right now. I want to be put away."

Frehley, meanwhile, spent half a decade pulling together the material for his first post-KISS project, 1987's *Frehley's Comet*. Frehley's marriage was deteriorating and he binged on whatever he could get his hands on. "They were years largely wasted on drugs and alcohol," he recalled in his memoir. Still, many felt the solo project was worth the wait.

Produced by KISS alum Eddie Kramer, *Frehley's Comet* sold half a million copies and climbed to number 43. As fast as he had disappeared, the guitarist reemerged a star. He toured. He made two more records in quick succession—1988's *Second Sighting* and 1989's *Trouble Walkin'*. But nothing stuck like *Frehley's Comet*, and he remained under the influence much of the time.

KISS, Criss, and Frehley took different paths to a similar place by the start of the 1990s: shrinking fan bases and dwindling prospects. ■



1991 — 2023

**YOU WANTED
THE
BEST,
YOU GOT THE
BEST**



**BUOYED BY A MEGA-REUNION AND
SWARMING CONVENTIONS, KISS
ROLLED ON, INTO THE ROCK & ROLL
HALL OF FAME AND THE HEARTS OF
A NEW GENERATION OF FANS.**





AFTER 40 YEARS, FOUNDING members Simmons and Stanley were still going strong in 2013. Stanley famously found Simmons abrasive and condescending when they first met, but it didn't take long for them to realize what they had in common—talent, focus, and considerable drive.

ERIC CARR HAD STARTED spitting up blood. The affable drummer who had become the third-longest-standing member of KISS was freaked out, so he called up Stanley: “They said it could be cancer,” Carr said. The doctors were right.

In early 1991, Carr was found to have a rare heart cancer. He died before the year’s end.


Thinking Carr would recover, KISS worked with new drummer Eric Singer on the sessions that would become 1992’s *Revenge*. Nobody

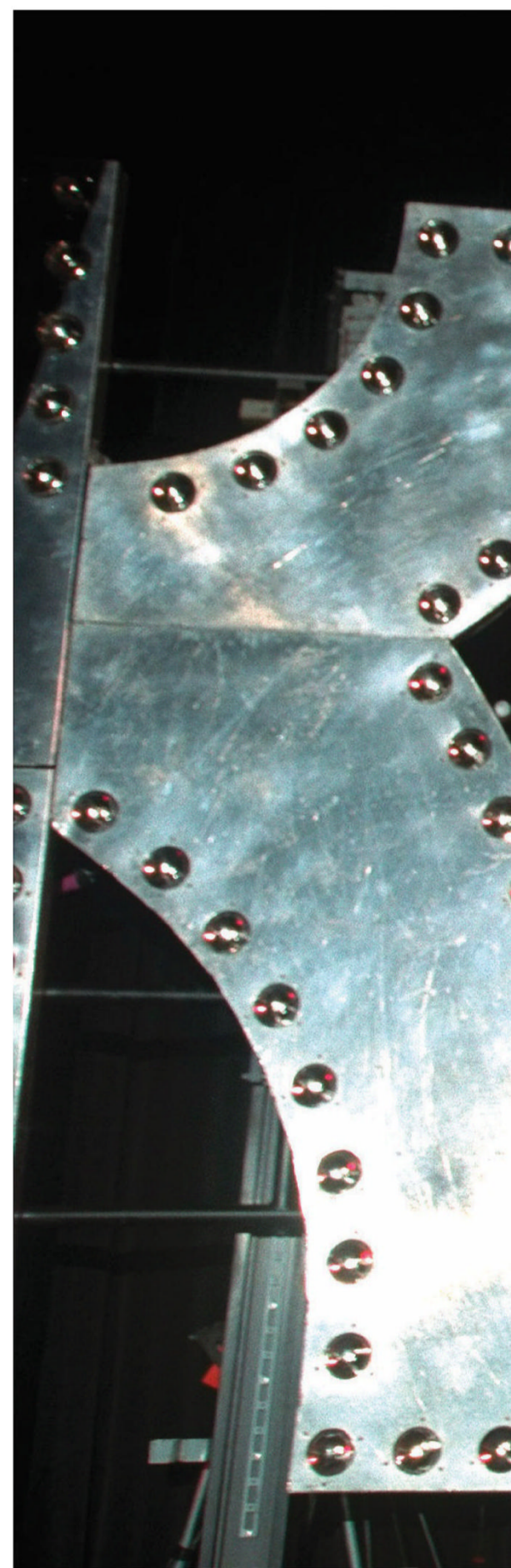
thought Carr’s days were numbered, and his death hit everyone hard. “The fans had loved Eric, and they weren’t the only ones,” Simmons recalled. “It devastated everybody.”

KISS once again entered a new decade down a member and out of sync with rock trends. Back with Bob Ezrin, KISS delivered its toughest, hardest rock record since *Creatures of the Night with Revenge*. The album was a relative success, hitting number 6 and going gold. But Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and Soundgarden were going gold 10 times over. “We felt as if Seattle and the grunge bands had killed rock and roll,” Simmons lamented.

While this wasn’t exactly true (AC/DC, Aerosmith, and Van Halen still did big business on tour and in record stores), it felt true for a certain generation of rockers. Models prancing around in videos were out. Shouting about your feelings while dressed in flannel was in. But if KISS was going to transition to a heritage act, Simmons would oversee that change using his best and boldest business instincts.

For years, fans had put on KISS conventions. In the mid-’90s, Simmons realized he could top anything anyone else could mount. On June 17, 1995, KISS launched the first official

—  —
**“THERE IT WAS:
THE KISS ARMY,
THE KISS NATION,
ALIVE AND WELL.
CLEARLY WHAT WAS
RUNNING THROUGH
THEIR VEINS
WAS BELIEF.”**



WEARING LOVE GUN-ERA costumes, the original four-some made a surprise appearance on the Grammy Awards in February 1996 (left, with Tupac). In April, aboard the U.S.S. *Intrepid* (above), KISS announced their *Alive/Worldwide* reunion tour, which played nearly 200 shows in more than 20 countries.



worldwide KISS Convention Tour in Burbank, California. A kind of traveling KISS museum plus Q&A sessions and acoustic sets from the band, the conventions attracted thousands of fans in two dozen cities—thousands of fans *and* Peter Criss.

At that California kickoff, Criss appeared onstage with Simmons and Stanley for the first time in 16 years. KISS leaders doubted Criss could hold down a beat, so they had new drummer

Eric Singer play while Criss sang a few songs. But they couldn't miss how Criss made the event magical.

"The experience of doing [the conventions] really opened up our eyes to the living, breathing thing that we had created above and beyond the records and songs," Simmons remembered. "There it was: the KISS Army, the KISS nation, alive and well. Clearly, what was running through their veins was belief in this bizarre thing

that we had created."

Fans in full makeup got married at the conventions. Some of them gleefully announced during Q&As that they had named their daughters after KISS songs—Beth and Christine being the obvious favorites. They bathed in the nostalgia of their '70s heroes.

The events made the band want to connect with Frehley again. The acoustic sets intrigued the producers of MTV's hit show *Unplugged*. The

SIMMONS AT TIGER STADIUM
in Detroit on June 28, 1996,
in the kickoff concert for the
Alive/Worldwide reunion tour.





FREHLEY AND STANLEY AT
the opening night concert in
Detroit, the first time the
original foursome had played
together in more than 15 years.

reunion millions wanted picked up a full head of steam.

Simmons and Stanley knew a reunion would be huge. They also had spent years with Criss and Frehley and knew their unpredictability. Drummer Eric Singer and guitarist Bruce Kulick would play the bulk of the *Unplugged* taping. While there were plenty of headaches and hassles that came with corralling the four original members' strong personalities, the guys rekindled the old fire.

"Despite all the problems, despite all the torture, when we played together it felt like 1974 again," Simmons admitted. "We weren't as good as we were with Eric or Bruce, not as proficient or as tuneful. But we had a kind of a swagger, a loose rock-and-roll thing that perhaps the Stones have always been more about than the Beatles. The fans loved it. It looked great."

Criss had spent years trying to dig himself out of a hole—divorce, tours with shoestring budgets, flop solo records, mounting IRS bills. Criss

couldn't really stand Stanley and Simmons, but he could stomach them for another ride around the globe and a massive paycheck. Alone at home on his 50th birthday—December 20, 1995—he popped the cork on a bottle of champagne, lit a cigar, and said to himself: "God, look at you, you crazy bastard. You're going to be rich again. Life is good, you fucker."

Life would be very good to the Cat, Demon, Spaceman, and Starchild over the next few months.

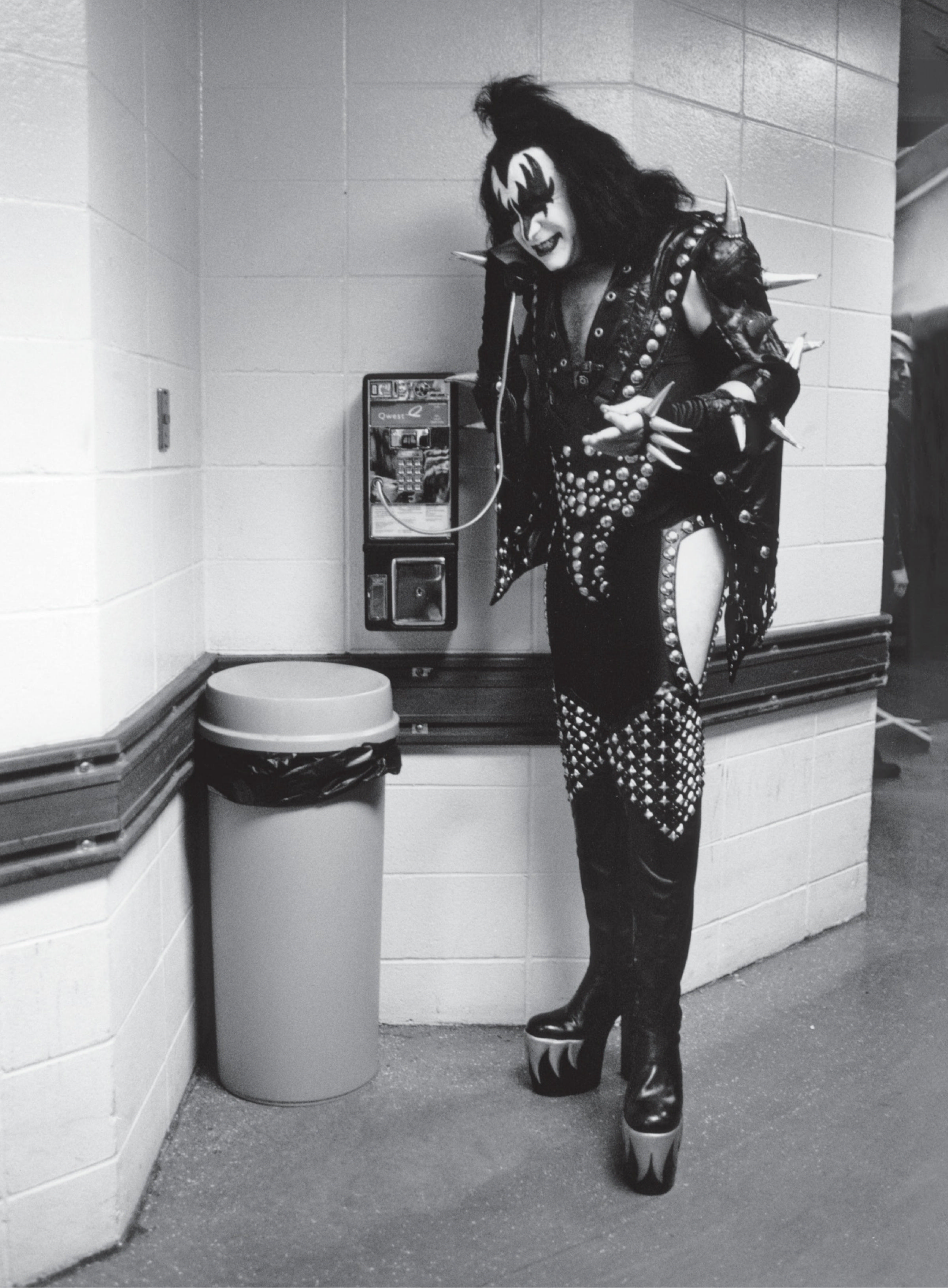
On February 28, 1996, Tupac Shakur took the Grammy stage saying, "You know how the Grammys used to be, all straight-looking folks with suits? Everybody looking tired. No surprises. We tired of that. We need something different, something new, we need to shock the people . . . so let's shock the people!" Then all four original members of KISS, in full makeup and costumes for the first time since 1979, walked out to join the hip-hop star.

The reunion became official on April 16, when the band held a press

SIMMONS, TOMMY THAYER, and Stanley (below) on May 13, 2004, at Rod Laver Arena in Melbourne, Australia, on the Rock the Nation World Tour. Opposite: Hold the phone! That's Simmons backstage in 2003.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 81







KISS IN MUNICH, 2008. EARLY in the band's rise, record executive Neil Bogart asked Stanley to ditch the star and try something else, concerned it wasn't manly enough. Stanley reluctantly agreed and auditioned a Lone Ranger look for one show before returning to his single star.







CONTINUED FROM PAGE 76

conference hosted by Conan O'Brien. In classic KISS fashion they did it big, holding it aboard the U.S.S. *Intrepid* aircraft carrier in New York and simulcasting it internationally. But the tour would exceed even the band's outsized expectations.

KISS sold 38,000 tickets in 47 minutes to the reunion's opening night at Detroit's Tiger Stadium (with scalpers hawking front-row seats for a whopping \$7,000). Then the band sold out Madison Square Garden for an astounding four shows. KISS mania hit a fever pitch.

Behind the scenes, it was marathon sessions with lawyers, managers, musical tutors, and personal trainers. "The last thing I wanted was people to be

disappointed when they saw a bunch of fat guys in tights," Stanley said. And when the curtain went up, the band was electric. As Frehley said of the first show, "From the moment we hit the stage, 40,000 screaming fans stood up, and the excitement continued until the final encore."

Over the course of 13 months, KISS played 192 dates. The tour outsold those of Garth Brooks, the Eagles, and Rod Stewart to become the highest-grossing tour of 1996. It was time for the four to make a reunion record—the four with the help of studio musicians.

By 1998's *Psycho Circus*, the band had returned to squabbling. The original lineup laid only one of the album's tracks together ("Into the Void"). But

THAYER, SPLAYED, IN 2009 (above). Stanley, airborne, in 2008 (opposite).

fan enthusiasm for the LP was massive. *Psycho Circus* moved 110,000 copies in its first week and debuted at number 3, a KISS milestone. Fans couldn't get enough of Paul, Gene, Ace, and Peter. Or was it that they couldn't get enough of Starchild, the Demon, Spaceman, and the Cat?

At one show, Criss insisted his sore muscles made it impossible for him to play. The KISS camp drafted drum tech Eddie Kanon to fill in. Kanon shaved, put on the Cat makeup, and it was on with the show. The characters and costumes carried the biggest weight.

By the time KISS launched their Farewell Tour (well, their *first* Farewell


**KISS SOLD 38,000
TICKETS IN
47 MINUTES TO THE
OPENING NIGHT AT
DETROIT'S TIGER
STADIUM. THEN THE
BAND SOLD OUT FOUR
NIGHTS AT MADISON
SQUARE GARDEN.**

Tour) in 2000, the bad blood hit a boiling point. The band members quarreled about money and creative control. During those final tours, Stanley and Simmons raked in a lot more money than did Frehley and Criss—who were not brought back as partners but rather on multimillion dollar employee contracts. Stanley and Simmons, who had carried and developed KISS during the long absence of Frehley and Criss, felt the arrangement was justified. “There are four members in the band, and everybody's in the same car,” Simmons explained to *Spin* magazine at the time. “But just by design, two guys have to be in front and two guys in the back.”

Then bickering became blowouts.





KISS PERFORMED A TYPICALLY energetic and visually exciting show in 2012.



SHOW SCHEDULE

DOORS

KISS

TUESDAY OCT 29TH

IN KEY WEST 8:00 PM

4:30 PM GENE MAKEUP

PM BAND MAKEUP

0-8:45 PM KIDS MEET

00 PM - KISS ON STAGE

Frehley decked road manager (and future KISS guitarist) Tommy Thayer backstage. While onstage, Criss kicked his kit off the drum riser at Stanley's head.

"Everyone stood up and cheered, and Paul thought the cheers were for him until he turned around and saw a huge tom-tom coming down at him," Criss recalled.

Criss would quit the Farewell Tour a couple of times. He would never make peace with his old bandmates, but around the time of the reunion he found the love of his life in Gigi Criss, his third wife. By each other's sides, they both beat cancer in the early 2000s. "We have an unbreakable bond between us," Peter gushed. "Facing cancer together truly made us inseparable soulmates, and we're closer now than ever."

During the 2000 tour, Frehley was still unchained and untamed. How much so? On a day off from tour, he got drunk and fired an Uzi so furiously the gun jammed and sent bullet

fragments into his chest. After leaving KISS for good in 2001, Frehley began his long journey to get clean with the help of his daughter Monique. In 2006, sobriety stuck after Monique called him when she heard he'd fallen off the wagon. "She realized I was going down a road from which I might not return," Frehley remembered. "She started crying, and somehow got through to me."




STANLEY WATCHED AN L.A. Lakers game in 2013 with wife Erin and their son, Colin (above). They also have two daughters, and Stanley has a son from his first marriage. In 1982, Stanley had successful reconstructive surgery on his right ear. Simmons and Thayer performed in the air in 2013 (below). Opposite: Drummer Eric Singer backstage in 2013.



Frehley and Criss were done with KISS. Stanley and Simmons were not.

“After the [Farewell] tour was over, it didn’t take me very long to realize I didn’t want to say goodbye to the band,” Stanley said. “I wanted to say goodbye to two members. It’s easy for scrooge and the naysayers to say, ‘They’ve done a farewell tour,’ but you’ve never walked in my shoes, let alone my boots.”

The two KISS leaders soldiered on with Tommy Thayer and Eric Singer in Ace and Peter’s makeup. And millions of fans okayed the transition. KISS toured constantly and recorded two new albums—2009’s *Sonic Boom* and 2012’s *Monster*—and they did pretty damn well considering nobody



**WHILE SOME DOUBT
STANLEY AND
SIMMONS WILL
EVER HANG UP
THEIR COSTUMES,
THE BAND LEADERS
INSIST THAT 2023
WILL BE KISS’S
FINAL YEAR.**

bought albums by then.

Stanley’s marriage to Pamela Bowen slowly fell apart in the decade that led up to the first goodbye tour in the 2000s. But Stanley found his soulmate in Erin Sutton. The two married in 2005 and have three kids. Between family and KISS, Stanley happily flirted with solo projects and a career as a painter.

Simmons lived his life out loud (and outrageously) over seven seasons and 160 episodes of *Gene Simmons Family Jewels*. The reality-TV show put the whole Simmons family—wife Shannon and kids Sophie and Nick—in living rooms across the globe. In 2011, the





series' penultimate season, Simmons and Tweed got married after 28 years together.

AS KISS APPROACHED THE 40TH anniversary of their debut album, in 2014, the band had one final mountain to climb: winning over the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame voters. The band had been eligible for induction into the Hall of

Fame since 1999. But year after year, the Hall snubbed KISS in favor of pop stars and poets (see Madonna and Leonard Cohen). Finally—a decade and a half too late, some said—the Hall celebrated rock's most gruesome and glorious rock band.

"I recall as a 15-year-old, telling one bully, 'You can kiss my KISS-loving ass,' because KISS was never a critic's band, KISS was a people's band," guitarist

KISS ROCKED DES MOINES in 2014 (above). That same year, the band was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame (opposite) but refused to perform because the hall only recognized the original four members.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 90

STANLEY IN 2015 AT AGE 63.
He still sunk to the floor—only
now in knee pads to protect
joints that had felt much wear
in high-heeled boots.







THE BAND BACKSTAGE IN London in 2017 (above). Stanley played hairdresser for Singer in 2022 (opposite).

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 87

Tom Morello declared while inducting his all-time favorite band into the Hall. Morello wrapped up his gushing speech shouting: “Tonight, it’s not the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Tonight it’s the Rock and Roll All Nite and Party Every Day Hall of Fame!”

The feuding between bandmates didn’t end, but the original four put aside their differences long enough to celebrate their history and their fan base. And to take a shot at the gatekeepers who, foolishly, doubted the eternal power of the KISS Army.

“For us, this is a special night, but it’s really a special night for our fans, because this is vindication,” Stanley said. “The people pay for tickets. The people buy albums. The people who nominate [Hall inductees] do not.”

This year KISS marks its 50th anniversary—and the fifth anniversary

of the kickoff to its End of the Road World Tour (which Covid delayed multiple times). While some doubt Stanley and Simmons will ever hang up their costumes, the band leaders insist 2023 will be this incarnation of KISS’s final year playing concerts. Stanley is 71, Simmons 73.

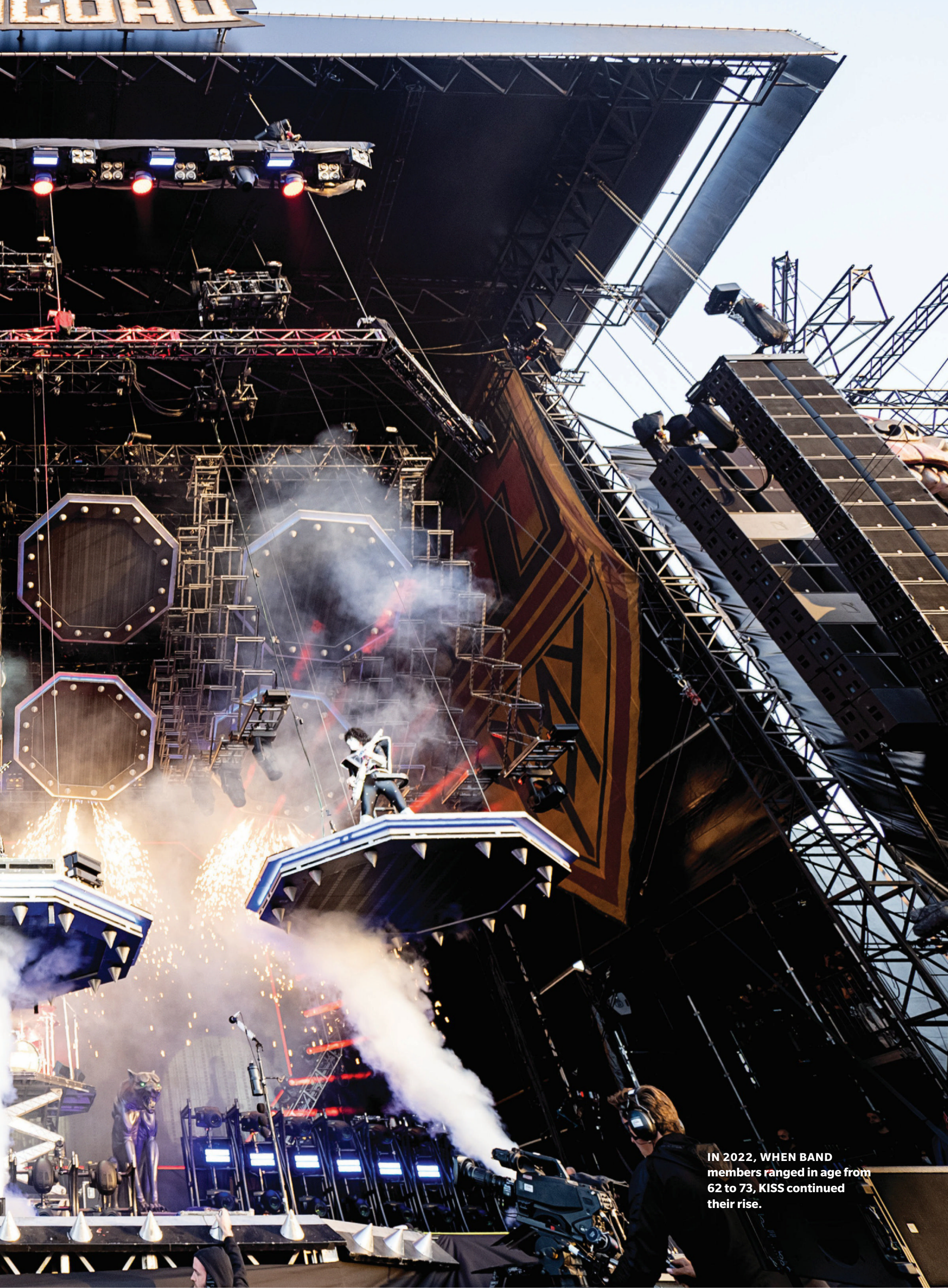
Of course, that doesn’t need to be the end of the band. In their classic P.T. Barnum fashion, both Stanley and Simmons see KISS as an immortal band and brand.

“KISS will continue,” Simmons insisted. “Maybe not in the way you expect, but it will live on.”

Stanley backed up his bandmate of five decades: “I look forward to the day that I’m replaced in KISS. Not because I want to leave, but because it will prove I’m right: *KISS is bigger than any of its members.*” ■







IN 2022, WHEN BAND members ranged in age from 62 to 73, KISS continued their rise.



KISS

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KISS IN EUROPE IN 2015.
The previous year, Simmons said KISS's longevity is due to hard work, consistency, and devoted fans: "What you see is what you get. Every night. We go play for our bosses. Our fans, who are standing on their seats, cheering."

KISS MEETS THE MAMAS AND THE PAPAS



At a 1977 show at Madison Square Garden, the members of KISS (plus mustachioed manager Bill Aucoin) gathered backstage with some of their unpainted parents. The day before the gig, Peter Criss—who's standing behind his parents, the Criscuolas—told a reporter: “I used to tell my folks I’d end up [at the Garden] one day, and they’d always laugh. So tomorrow night we’re playing the Garden, and when I think about that I get cold.”



YOU WANTED THE BEST, YOU GOT THE BEST!

Five decades on, KISS's extraordinary live shows remain grounded in a commitment to the performance and the people who come to see them. "We play for our bosses—our fans who are standing on their seats," said Gene Simmons. He's also said: "A rock star on tour is a king in his domain."

